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Disrupting the Heteropatriarchy in *Temblores* (2019) and *Clara Sola* (2021)

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This article proposes an innovative approach to contemporary Film Studies by examining three key themes of rebellion against heteropatriarchal norms in Central American films *Temblores* (2019) by acclaimed Guatemalan director Jayro Bustamante and *Clara Sola* (2021), the debut by Costa Rican director Nathalie Álvarez Mesén. Unlike previous studies of Central American cinema that primarily focus on traditional narrative structures or socio-political themes, this article uses the gaze, the creation of new worlds and rebellion as methodological lenses through which to underline the subversion of heteropatriarchal norms within both films. It argues that through the cinematic gaze and the sharing of new, rebellious worlds with the spectator, they develop emotive narratives alongside an affective visual aesthetic which renders them powerful counternarratives. Starting with the participatory gaze, this article explores how the films' realist narrative construction—employing classical tropes of good *versus* evil—works alongside the creation of visual affect that forges a connection between spectator and protagonist. Following this, the concept of queer time and space, as articulated by Jack Halberstam, is used to analyse the creation of new worlds in *Temblores*, while in *Clara Sola* the new world of the protagonist will be examined through the depiction of an alternative cosmovision. This analysis will show that light, sound and the natural world are used to carve out new spaces for the protagonists, inviting the spectator into their counterhegemonic worlds. Finally, by employing bell

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hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze and an oppositional stance more broadly, the article demonstrates how the protagonists of these films rebel against heteropatriarchal norms and call for social justice.

The overriding theme of disrupting heteropatriarchal norms is prevalent in much contemporary cinema from Central America, where filmmaking has flourished since the turn of the twenty-first century. José Manuel Moreno Domínguez estimates that between 2000–2019 over 130 feature-length fiction films were produced in Central America.¹ Although he states that these 'habían permanecido ocultas o casi invisibles para el resto del mundo',² the same cannot be said of Guatemalan director Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona* (2019), which was nominated for an Oscar, among other prestigious international prizes. Bustamante studied Communications at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala before continuing his studies in filmmaking in Paris and Rome.³ Later, he co-founded the production company La Casa de Producción in order to broaden the possibilities of filmmaking in Guatemala.⁴ *Temblores* was his second feature-length film and is the second film in his trilogy of 'insults'. Describing 'indio, hueco, comunista' as 'los tres términos considerados como los insultos más ultrajantes en Guatemala',⁵ Bustamante decided to start his directing career by making a film on each of these topics. *Temblores* focuses on Pablo, an upper-class husband and father who announces that he is leaving his family to move in with his male partner, Francisco. His conservative, Pentecostal family use religion and punishment to force him to change his mind, including the use of conversion therapy and removing access to his children. This latter decision eventually forces him to give up his true life with Francisco and return to the family home. Although LGBTQ+ rights have been enshrined in many Latin-American countries—including Guatemala—for some time, Kristi Wilson and Clara Garavelli note that heteropatriarchal modes of seeing the world are still the norm in Latin-American audiovisual media, both in film and advertising.⁶ Charo García-Diego contends that it is this normativity that is being undone by

1 José Manuel Moreno Domínguez, 'Avances, dificultades y retos para una política de integración cinematográfica en centroamérica', *Chasqui. Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*, 142 (2019–2020), 265–81 (p. 269).

2 Moreno Domínguez, 'Avances, dificultades y retos', 269.

3 Diane Bracco, 'Indio, hueco, comunista. Aproximaciones a la trilogía guatemalteca de Jayro Bustamante', in *Fantasmas, justicia y reparación en Guatemala: la llorona de jayro Bustamante*, ed. Julie Amiot-Guillouet et al., *Pandora. Revue d'Études Hispaniques*, 16 (2021), 109–31 (p. 113); available at <<https://etudes-romanes.univ-paris8.fr/?pandora-no16-fantasmas-justicia-y-reparacion-en-guatemala-la-llorona-de-jayro>> (accessed 27 March 2025).

4 Bracco, 'Indio, hueco, comunista', 113.

5 Bracco, 'Indio, hueco, comunista', 110.

6 Kristi M. Wilson & Clara Garavelli, 'Gender, Sexuality, Film, and Media in Latin America: Challenging Representation and Structures', in *Gender, Sexuality, Film, and*

fiction filmmakers from Central America in particular, stating that, ‘muy a pesar del peligro real de agresiones por parte de quienes representan posturas homófobas, existe una lucha militante que utiliza la cámara como arma de denuncia’.⁷ This is precisely what I argue Bustamante does with *Temblores*, forcibly placing the spectator alongside Pablo, empathizing with him in the face of injustice.

In comparison, *Clara Sola* focuses on a different type of sexuality—women’s masturbation. Director Álvarez Mesén, who is half Costa Rican and half Swedish, has a background in mime and physical theatre, having studied in Costa Rica, the US and Sweden where the film’s main production company, Hobab, is based.⁸ It tells the story of Clara, a middle-aged woman who lives with her elderly mother, Doña Fresia, and her young niece, María, who will soon celebrate her *quinceañera*. Clara is used by her mother as an intermediary for the Virgin Mary, and Doña Fresia organizes gatherings where people make offerings to, and pray through, Clara as an intercessor to the Virgin. When Santiago, a young seasonal worker, arrives in the small rural village where they live, her sexuality is awakened and she begins to rebel against the strict confines forced on her by her mother. Álvarez Mesén has been described by María Lourdes Cortés as one of a group of Costa Rican women filmmakers, ‘que han venido explorando los cuerpos, deseos y la sexualidad femenina, además de cuestionar instituciones como la maternidad, la familia tradicional y la moral conservadora’, and in the case of this film it is certainly the Catholic Church which is seen, through Doña Fresia, as imposing heteropatriarchal boundaries on Clara.⁹ According to David Tombs, in Latin America, ‘the Catholic Church’s teachings on sexuality have played a crucial part in supporting this history of oppression and legitimizing machista/marianista ideologies’,¹⁰ going on to note that the conflation of a woman’s sexuality with sin has been ‘particularly disastrous’ in the region.¹¹ It is this that *Clara Sola*, I argue, dismantles

Media in Latin America: Challenging Representation and Structures, ed. Kristi M. Wilson & Clara Garavelli, *Latin American Perspectives*, 48:2 (2021), 4–16.

7 Charo García Diego, ‘Nuevas miradas en el cine centroamericano del siglo XXI’, *Revista Ístmica*, 1:30 (2022), 27–42 (p. 32).

8 For a full list of producers, co-producers and funders see ‘Clara Sola’, *LuxboxFilms.com*, n.d., n.p.; <<https://www.luxboxfilms.com/clara-sola>> (accessed 12 November 2024).

9 María Lourdes Cortés, ‘“Clara Sola”: una exploración fílmica del placer’, *La Nación*, 20 November 2021, n.p.; available at <<https://www.nacion.com/ancora/clara-sola-una-exploracion-filmica-del-placer/DPXKRJETEBGW7TIO7ELWWUUTMCU/story/>> (accessed 11 July 2024).

10 David Tombs, ‘Machismo and Marianismo: Liberation Theology and Sexuality’, in *Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter & David Tombs (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 248–71 (p. 254).

11 Tombs, ‘Machismo and Marianismo’, 254.

through recourse to a pre-colonial world-view that aligns a woman's sexuality with nature and empowerment instead.

The Participatory Gaze

The first rebellion that will be analysed here is what I term the participatory gaze, in which the camera, visuals and narrative all force the spectator to access the world of the film through the protagonist—to feel and see alongside them. Although Teresa de Lauretis posits that, 'the emphasis must be shifted away from the artist behind the camera, the gaze, or the text as origin and determination of meaning',¹² she later contends that instead, 'we must develop our understanding of cinema's implication in other modes of cultural representation and its possibilities of both production and counterproduction of social vision'.¹³ Analysing the gaze as participatory—whereby the audience experiences the film through and alongside the protagonist—demonstrates exactly how these two films function as cultural representations and act to counter dominant, heteropatriarchal ways of seeing the world. This gaze is created visually—through the use of camerawork, lighting and *mise-en-scène*—as well as through the narratives that underline a sense of injustice through the punishments suffered by the protagonists at the hands of the films' religious gatekeepers. Visually, from the start of *Temblores* we are certainly aligned with Pablo, and it is no coincidence that the camera is positioned diagonally behind him as he drives a car through Ciudad de Guatemala in the opening shot. This allows the spectator to see him while also participating in his gaze; it is a long, silent scene containing the diegetic sound of traffic noise and in which nothing actually happens, forcing us to ask who Pablo is and where he is going. This is strikingly similar to the opening shots from *Clara Sola* in which the blurry face of Clara is revealed to us in a medium close-up where her hand reaches towards the camera—and therefore also towards the audience—as she slowly comes into focus. Both characters remain the bearers of the gaze throughout the films, and it is their stories, actions, thoughts and feelings that are conveyed to the audience. Even when the dialogue is elsewhere, the narratives revolve around Pablo and Clara respectively.

This type of gaze is also present in the films' narratives. Both within their plotlines and their aesthetics, they evoke the 'good' *versus* 'evil' tropes of Hollywood cinema, creating sympathetic protagonists who encounter

12 Teresa de Lauretis, 'Rethinking Women's Cinema', in her *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed., with an intro., by Patricia White (Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2007), 25–47 (p. 34).

13 Lauretis, 'Rethinking Women's Cinema', 34.

morally depraved villains. What is interesting here, is that the antagonists of these productions complicate the official moralistic view that their countries of origin perpetuate, as it is the Christian representatives—evangelists in the case of *Temblores* and Catholics in the case of *Clara Sola*—who are constructed as sources of evil in the narratives. Sally Hines argues that religious values have been central to how gender is constructed in society, stating that they are ‘significant in setting up and maintaining gendered moral codes and gender roles’.¹⁴ This can be seen clearly in the films as both Pablo and Clara are rendered voiceless and then physically and emotionally punished for transgressing the strict gendered norms prescribed for them by the guardians of moral codes. The boundaries that are set for both characters are depicted as part of normative society’s heteropatriarchal values, but they are also explicitly enforced by the religious matriarchs and wreak havoc on the personal freedoms of the protagonists.

In *Temblores*, the effect of setting up the religious characters as antagonists is achieved in the narrative through their unkind treatment of Pablo, and in the visuals through the use of darkness. Jack Halberstam posits that work by queer artists, such as Andy Warhol in Halberstam’s example, ‘works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic’.¹⁵ Although Bustamante is himself a queer artist, he uses his film to subvert this trope. Instead of darkness representing queer subjectivity, here Pablo is cloaked in light while the confines of his religious family home are associated with darkness and oppression. This also has the added effect of working in opposition to the normative position of much Christian doctrine. At the film’s beginning, when Pablo arrives at his house to be greeted by one of his domestic workers, we are shown a colonial-style mansion which is dimly lit, drably decorated and gloomy—partially lit by candles. His family are styled in formal clothes, buttoned to the neck, and they are positioned silently among the dark, ornate furniture. The scenes are reminiscent of Bustamante’s other 2019 film, *La Llorona*, with this space mirroring the dark and suffocating home that houses Guatemala’s former bloodthirsty dictator, Enrique Monteverde, in that production. Far from the religious image of God’s children on earth as full of light, joy and love, Pablo’s family are styled to portray the opposite. This immediately aligns the spectator with Pablo’s gaze; through the lighting and *mise-en-scène* we are forced to see his family, and the values they stand for, the way he does—shrouded in darkness and misery.

14 Sally Hines, *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 61.

15 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2011), 96.

The suffocating atmosphere which is created visually here is reinforced by the narrative as Bustamante purposefully builds tension while creating a bond between spectator and protagonist. For the first twenty-one minutes of the film, although it is clear that something dramatic has occurred, the audience is not aware of what that may be, perhaps as a directorial tactic to garner the spectator's sympathy before revealing the protagonist has come out as gay to his family and left his wife for his male partner. In these scenes, the spectator sees Pablo as ostracized both physically and emotionally by his family, creating sympathy for him. Upon entering the house, he stands silently in front of the door facing his family members, and the camera is positioned between the two to demonstrate their oppositional stances. Pablo then, still without speaking, runs to his bedroom and locks the door as the camera immediately cuts to his mother praying the rosary, setting up Pablo's defiance in the face of religious codes. When Pablo's sister runs to his door, she exclaims '¡se encerró!', a coded message that Pablo cannot literally, and/or figuratively, come out while within the oppressive confines of his family home.

The removal of Pablo's voice and agency runs as an undercurrent throughout the rest of the film, with his family's reactions to his coming out depicted as extreme and harmful. His sister is incredulous, only able to ask if some traumatic incident happened to him as a child. His brother-in-law represents a well-worn form of toxic masculinity as he reacts violently to Pablo's decision to come out, ripping the covers off a cowering Pablo and shouting that his family do not deserve this. His father suggests he sweep it all under the carpet, stating 'sale ... a negarlo todo ... lo único importante es conservar a la familia porque con ellos va a poder envejecer tranquilamente'. While these secondary characters provide a variety of negative reactions, it is in fact the two mother figures—Pablo's mother and his wife, who is mother to his two children—who are set up as the agents of religious judgement and punishment, just as Clara's mother is in *Clara Sola*. Pablo's mother states: 'es una prueba invisible, pero usted es fuerte, usted va a vencer', clearly demonstrating the religious or spiritual implications of his pronouncement. Later, when she asks him to accompany her to a church service, she tells him 'levante su cara m'ijo, para que no le miren su vergüenza' making it clear that he has done something that the religious community would be ashamed of. Moreover, when comforting Pablo's wife, Isa, his mother gives her some tea which she complains is bitter, leaving her to say 'no importa, tómese todo' in a symbolic statement that they should pretend as if nothing has happened, making Pablo's sexuality a bitter pill to swallow. Throughout these scenes, it is Pablo's family who make pronouncements, who advise or console, but who also use their voices. Pablo remains silent and voiceless despite being the bearer of the gaze.

In *Clara Sola* it is also the matriarchal presence that takes the role of the religious antagonist. Here, Clara's mother Doña Fresia imposes the boundaries by which Clara must live, infantilizing and controlling her at every turn. Shohini Chaudhuri notes that, 'in film, not only is the woman's body constructed as lacking; so is her voice'.¹⁶ This is certainly true for Clara within this narrative, although not for her mother or niece. Director Álvarez Mesén, in an interview with Jeremy Kay, has stated that the plot:

[...] comes a bit from memories of growing up in Latin America in a Catholic society with a patriarchal tradition, and how often it was the mothers and the grandmothers imposing these [norms] and not necessarily the men. So this is kind of a matriarchal house reproducing patriarchal traditions. It's a way to also point the finger at ourselves and open up the door to some sort of view into that process.¹⁷

The infantilization of Clara is shocking (to some extent) in this film as, despite being a woman in her forties, her mother insists on controlling every aspect of her life. In the opening scenes we see Clara reaching a boundary marked out by purple cloths tied to trees and fence posts, unable to reach her horse, Yuca. We later see her lean across this purple boundary again, using a stick to push fallen fruit closer to her so she can collect it. It is not until later in the film that Clara vocalizes that this is part of her conditioning by her mother to keep her within certain physical parameters and confines. Cortés notes of this film that 'aunque resulte paradójico, son las mujeres las que sostienen y reproducen el sistema de dominación real y simbólica' and although the mother is the villain of the story, it is also clear she is acting out the religious morals she herself has assumed.¹⁸

This is a point that Hines picks up on in her assessment of contemporary gender norms as she states that: '[...] religious moral codes stressing women's purity and emphasizing the importance of female chasteness legitimize sex segregation in public life and religious practice'.¹⁹ This idea of Clara being segregated from adulthood itself as well as from others and the projection of a chaste and sexless version of womanhood are forced on her by her mother all in the name of religion. Emphasizing this, a key part of Clara's life is the local belief—presumably created by her mother—that after an encounter with the Virgin Mary when she was younger, Clara is now a

16 Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

17 Jeremy Kay, 'In Conversation: The Directors of Oscar Contenders from Costa Rica, Mexico and Argentina', *Screen Daily*, 17 December 2021, n.p.; available at <<https://www.screendaily.com/features/in-conversation-the-directors-of-oscar-contenders-from-costa-rica-mexico-and-argentina/5166088.article>> (accessed 11 July 2024).

18 Cortés, '“Clara Sola”', n.p.

19 Hines, *Is Gender Fluid?*, 61.

vehicle of the divine with certain healing powers. As such, Fresia uses this both to make money and to justify the boundaries she puts up around Clara. On prayer evenings where Clara acts as an intercessor, Fresia styles her in a high-necked, long white dress and with a modest hairstyle to show her purity and humility; the assumption is she could no longer be used to channel the Virgin if she were defiled in any way. At the house, people gather by candlelight with icons of the Virgin Mary around them. Beverley Clack argues that the discourse of women standing in as virgins and vessels is the outcome of four centuries of thought that separates spirituality from sexuality, stating, 'historically, the most important model for the spiritual life offered by Christian theologians has been that of the virgin', demonstrating that Fresia's adherence to these codes lies deep within the normative traditions of post-colonial Central America.²⁰

Crowding into the tiny prayer room in Fresia's house gives the viewer the sense of a cramped, oppressive space which stands in semi-darkness, and despite the poorer nature of this family when compared with Pablo's in *Temblores*, it is clear that darkness is also used here to represent the oppressive role of religion in the films. Moreover, the same discourse is used by the religious antagonists in prayer in both films. While Fresia announces that through Clara the Virgin has cured cancer, heart problems and emotional ills, in *Temblores* the pastor of the evangelical church prays for 'los que tienen un corazón enfermo... los que se encuentran perdidos'. The implied message is that both Clara and Pablo are in some way sick due to their sexual exploration and sexuality respectively, which challenge the Christian gender norms that surround them. In both films, the congregants also raise hands around the protagonists, encasing them on all sides and furthering the suffocating aspect of religion which does not allow them to escape to freedom. It is interesting that in both films there are financial implications for both characters too, demonstrating the extent to which normative lifestyles are prioritized by the societies represented in the films. In *Temblores*, after coming out, Pablo loses his job and is forced to take a job in the Church when he finds himself unemployable elsewhere. Moreover, the pastor sells him conversion therapy as if it is a product made by a commercial company, telling him about the success of the programme in a variety of Latin-American countries. In *Clara Sola*, Clara states—using Yuca the horse as her animal double—that although Yuca does not like being tied up, it is his job just as her mother says that Clara 'trabaja para Dios'. The subtext here that Pablo has been shunned by wider society and that Clara is also kept trapped like an animal wanting its freedom is evident.

20 Beverley Clack, 'Virgins and Vessels: Feminist Reflections on Dominant Models of Spirituality', in *Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Hayes, Porter & Tombs, 193–202 (p. 193).

The narratives also enhance the participatory gaze by enmeshing the spectator with the protagonist in firm opposition to the religious antagonists through the physical and psychological punishments meted out to Pablo and Clara. The exact nature of what is being punished is clear: sexuality and the freedom to live as one chooses. In Pablo's case, this means his choice to live openly as a gay man with his partner, Francisco, and in Clara's this includes living as an adult and having a sex life which pleases her. In his article on ex-gay ministries and the portrayal of conversion therapy in Hollywood films, David Coon states that recent cinema from the US draws a 'clear line between Christian beliefs and sexual liberation'.²¹ He goes on to explain that since the Motion Picture Production Code ceased to exist in the US in 1968—meaning that filmmakers no longer had to show religious figures in a positive light—'films moved in the opposite direction'.²² Despite being made outside Hollywood, it seems that the use of a Christian antagonist shows *Temblores* and *Clara Sola* to be part of a wider trend. The punishment scenes—which are drawn out to force the audience to witness them in their full horror and to experience the pain of the protagonists—demonstrates this. Indeed, as Clare Smith notes of her study into the spectatorship of Jack the Ripper in cultural outputs, 'if the spectator is aligned with the victim then the experience is one of pain, terror and death'.²³ By participating in Pablo and Clara's gazes and worlds, the audience is encouraged to experience their hurt and terror during the punishment scenes.

In *Temblores*, Pablo's punishment starts as an anonymous tip is given to the police denouncing him as a paedophile which causes him to lose his job and access to his children. In order to see them again, he is forced to undergo a course of conversion therapy run by the Church. The scenes depicting his conversion therapy are at once deeply ironic and brutally visceral for the spectator. In the initial stages, the men are made to shower together naked while the pastor talks them through no longer being attracted to other men. The camera wanders among the upper bodies of these men as they cast furtive glances towards each other; the colour palette is a deliberate blue-grey to imbue these scenes with melancholy. After sleeping next to each other in single beds, the men are then made to wrestle each other while in their underwear as a physical form of wrestling their temptation. Despite the almost comical nature of these overtly

21 David R. Coon, 'God vs. Gay: Queer Counter-storytelling and Christianity in Films about Conversion Therapy', *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 7:3 (2022), 177–92 (p. 185).

22 Coon, 'God vs. Gay', 185.

23 Clare Smith, *Jack the Ripper in Film and Culture: Top Hat, Gladstone Bag and Fog* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 48.

homoerotic scenes being used in this way, the viewer is instead shocked as Pablo returns to the catatonic state in which he started the film. As he lies on the bed, we see a medium close-up of his face in a mirror image of the opening scenes in which his family confronted him; once again he is silent, devastated, voiceless. The therapy scenes with their overlay of blue-grey tones, interspersed with close-ups that show us the depths of Pablo's profound despair, and his lack of dialogue, make them particularly affective. Gertrud Koch has stated of this technique that 'the spectator [...] has no other choice but to follow the mercilessly segmenting gaze of the close-up; we cannot escape [...] unless we close our eyes. The camera thus prescribes the direction of the spectator's gaze'.²⁴ As the camera forces us to look at Pablo—really look at and consider his inner depths—we are forced to experience the cruelty of what he is put through. It is the affective power of the gaze and other visual elements which means that this film, as those Coon also studies, 'use[s] counter-storytelling to dismantle harmful ideologies and support social justice efforts for queer people'.²⁵ While in the Hollywood films that Coon analyses the character escapes conversion therapy and goes on to have a happier and more successful *dénouement*, Pablo is left without that possibility, perhaps signalling the increased difficulty of living outside religious gendered and sexual norms in Central America.

This contention is also true of Clara in *Clara Sola* as she is punished for her perceived sin of being a woman with sexual desires. Halberstam states that 'for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression'.²⁶ It would seem, then, that Clara is kept in a perpetual cycle of this type of adolescence, punished and repressed by her mother when she desires freedom, never allowed to grow into adulthood with agency. This is also a practice with its roots in the colonial history of Latin America as, when Catholicism was forcibly brought to the region, female sexuality was seen as punishable. In Zeb Tortorici's historical analysis of punishments for female masturbation, he demonstrates that during the colonial period it was often met with enforced isolation and confinement while the women committing these acts were associated with witchcraft.²⁷ Fresia's punishments of Clara do not stop at keeping her confined, however, and they are—like Pablo's conversion therapy—presented as visceral and cruel to the spectator. When Clara, who suffers from scoliosis of the spine, visits

24 Gertrud Koch, 'Ex-Changing the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory', *New German Critique*, 34 (1985), 139–53 (p. 141).

25 Coon, 'God vs. Gay', 178.

26 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 1998), 6.

27 Zeb Tortorici, 'Masturbation, Salvation, and Desire: Connecting Sexuality and Religiosity in Colonial Mexico', in *Latin American Sexualities*, ed. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16:3 (2007), 355–72 (p. 359).

the doctor to be told that a free operation would cure her condition, the camera focuses on Clara in a medium close-up, aligning viewer and protagonist, and we hear her mother's voice off camera as she states 'Dios me la mandó así y así me la voy a dejar', cruelly giving Clara no hope of recovery. Later, after Clara watches the passionate embraces of the daily soap opera with the ritualistic reverence of a religious act under the ever-present gaze of the large Virgin Mary statue, she begins to touch herself sexually through her clothes. Fresia takes her to the kitchen, cuts up a chilli and bathes her fingers in it as punishment. Later, we watch a long take as the camera follows Clara from her bed where she masturbates, through the house and out into the yard where she must hose the burning chilli off her. Her pain is lingered upon for the viewer to take in in this scene. Similarly, this visceral affect is created when, later, her mother states that chilli seems not to be enough of a deterrent and holds her hand above a lit candle to burn her palm as a punishment. Another long take where the camera's unceasing gaze forces us to share in Clara's pain, this shot enhances the power of the participatory gaze so that we feel alongside the protagonist.

The Creation of New Worlds

The second iteration of rebellion which will be analysed in this article is the creation of new worlds which the protagonist invites the spectator to access alongside them. bell hooks' work on the 'transgressive possibilities' for the construction of new identities is evident here, and these new spaces that the protagonists create for themselves exist in, but are separate to, normative society.²⁸ This is akin to Halberstam's concept of a queer time and place which exists, 'in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They [...] develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification'.²⁹ Through Pablo's embracing of his own sexuality and Clara's sexual self-actualization, we clearly see these characters' developing their personal freedoms in opposition to normative, heteropatriarchal, family models. The world that Pablo enters and creates for himself is set in stark contrast to the religious or normative world of his family and Guatemala City more widely, and again the contrast of light and dark, joy and sadness are used to mark out the claustrophobic boundaries of heteropatriarchal life. After his wife tells him to leave, we see Pablo walking alone along a rainy, deserted street; the

28 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 130.

29 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York/London: New York U. P., 2005), 1.

shot cuts to the inside of a bar which is filled with people, light, music, dancing and a palpable sense of joy through smiling faces and laughter. The door is opened to Pablo when he knocks, offering us a different take on a biblical story. This time it is Pablo rather than Mary and Joseph who has been unwelcome until the bar opens its doors to him like the inn did for them.

In later scenes, we see Pablo and Francisco's new apartment which is also juxtaposed against the dark formality of the family home. Here although the paint peels, the tiles are cracked and the traffic noise from the street outside is amplified, the lighting is bright with yellow tones and instead of servants, it is friends and acquaintances who come and go, demonstrating the supportive, communal world to which Pablo can now belong. These juxtaposed scenes continue with the space of the family home set up as a formal, silent and suffocating place where outsiders are not permitted through the guarded gates. Even the church where people gather in community and sing is cloaked in this same aura as the natural light from the windows is dimmed by curtains, everyone dresses in dark clothing, and the pastor wears her clothes and hair tightly to create a severe, unsmiling presence. Despite her sermons being about love, there is no warmth in the Church. Acting as a direct contrast after a church scene, the camera cuts to the centre for the elderly where Francisco works which has been staged to visually mirror the church. It is noisy, people are together, singing, but rather than dressing in dark colours they all wear white from head to toe, smile at each other joyfully, and dance with real warmth. Pablo, in his formal church attire, stands behind a pillar to watch the scene, so different from the service he has just left, before choosing to step towards Francisco and join this other, welcoming world.

In *Clara Sola* the protagonist also creates another world for herself, although hers is one not rooted in community like Pablo's queer time and place, but rather in the natural world. Although the director has described the film as having magical realist overtones, I argue that the connection that Clara has to the environment around her points more towards a pre-colonial, indigenous view of the world and its powers. The irony that the behaviours she displays and events she appears to make happen are described as magical or supernatural when they are actually the result of interacting and living with nature is not lost. Indeed, in her study of religion, sexuality and magic, Lyndal Roper notes that the Enlightenment saw a 'move away from an older, magical worldview in which the boundaries between oneself and the natural world were essentially permeable'³⁰ where the world became 'disenchanted'³¹ in a literal sense,

30 Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York/London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

31 Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, 21.

demonstrating that Clara's character takes us back to pre-Reformation or pre-colonial tropes which stand in opposition to the imposition of post-colonial Catholic ideals in Costa Rica.

This new world is developed through her connection to nature which is both emphasized in the narrative and enhanced through the cinematography. Clara makes frequent journeys into the forest that surrounds her home yet when she does so the camera takes a point-of-view shot as though from an animal, sitting low on the ground and clawing through the undergrowth which collides with the camera, thus aligning her with the animal or natural world. Indeed, when conceiving of this character Álvarez Mesén wrote her as 20% wolf and 80% human.³² When in the forest, the diegetic sounds of nature are always amplified, becoming much louder than would be natural for the human ear. The camera also frequently wanders, along with Clara's gaze, to small details such as spider webs, plants and caterpillars which are shown in extreme close-up for relatively long takes, forcing us to focus on the natural world and feel Clara's connection with it. This is a film that Cortés describes as 'multisensorial', stating that this tactic humanizes nature, 'concediéndola expresión y estableciendo conexiones entre ellos, la protagonista y el espectador'.³³ This relationship is furthered through the narrative connection between Clara and the family's horse, Yuca, with whom she speaks more fluently than to the humans that surround her. She speaks for the horse and to the horse, while their emotions tend to mirror one another. Women aligning themselves with the preservation of the natural world is an ecofeminist trope which also points towards Clara's rebellion against the heteropatriarchal outside world. This new world she creates thereby underlines Marina Najera's assertion that women colluding with nature is a powerful act of resistance as will be seen in the following section on her acts of oppositional rebellion.³⁴

Clara's connection to nature is also seen as having powerful effects in the real world of the film as she is able to bend nature to her will or to channel her emotions through it. Just as in *Temblores*, this film is also bookended by earthquakes, and in *Clara Sola* both are linked to the protagonist. In the first she lies among the grassy moss of the forest, pulling it out in clumps and heaping it on her pubis. She pushes her hands into the earth and a grumbling, thunderous sound overtakes the

32 This was discussed with the present author at the event, 'Liz Harvey-Kattou in conversation with Nathalie Álvarez Mesén', held at The Garden Cinema, London, 13 May 2024.

33 Cortés, '“Clara Sola”', n.p.

34 Marina Najera, 'Nature as Feminine: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Selected Latin American Narrative', Doctoral dissertation (University of California, Riverside, 2018), 16.

diegetic sound before the ground begins to tremble. Clack argues for an ecofeminist approach to spirituality, connecting it to female sexuality which is the link between the physical body and natural world, and this conflation of Clara's sexual self-discovery and power over, and in, nature, is palpable throughout the film.³⁵ In other scenes these emotions are again connected, for example when she spies on María and Santiago kissing in his bedroom, the green seeds in her hand ripen and turn red, mirroring the awakening of her sexual desire. When the beetle she had previously plucked from Santiago's sweater and kept in a makeshift home by her bed dies, she breathes over it, forcing it—and her feelings for Santiago—back to life. The second and final earthquake, which acts as a precursor to the *dénouement* of the film, is also channelled by her although this time through the force of her anger. Having been told at María's *quinceañera* party that a horse matching Yuca's description has been found dead, Clara enters the party in a primal rage, screaming and knocking things over. It is at this moment that the earth begins to quake once more as if it feels her rage and matches it. In this way, Clara's connection with nature—which is seen as real, powerful, but also profoundly natural in this film—encourages a pre-Enlightenment or pre-colonial world-view which is more in line with an indigenous or ecofeminist cosmovision.

Although the protagonist's connection to nature is less tangible in *Temblores*, this film is also bookended by earthquakes which act as the symbolic points of rupture in Pablo's narrative arc. The first occurs as he is locked away at home, his family having come to confront him about his plans to move out of the family home and live with Francisco and symbolizes his entry into his new world and life. The second earthquake represents the bigger rupture as, when he goes to check on his children following it, he is not allowed to enter the family home and he is confronted by the hatred of heteropatriarchal society. It is at this point that Isa tells him she will take his children from him and move to the US unless he participates in the Church's conversion therapy. In this way, this earthquake forces him to turn his back on his new world and the place of safety he has created in his search for personal freedom. The tremors of the title therefore precede the key turning points in Pablo's life and place a parenthesis around the true self that he strives to create in the queer space of the middle section of the film. Bustamante takes a classic storytelling formula of order-disorder-order restored and subverts it so that the order feels like suffocation and melancholy, and the disorder like freedom and truth.

35 See Clack, 'Virgins and Vessels'.

Oppositional Acts of Resistance

The final mode of rebellion that will be considered in this article is the way in which the affective and empathetic connection between spectator and protagonist is enhanced and weaponized against social injustice through recourse to oppositional acts. Coon points out that:

[...] while dominant groups circulate stories that naturalize the power and influence of their own groups, marginalized groups and individuals can use stories to challenge that dominance, often by pointing out the flaws in the naturalized world-views circulated by those in power.³⁶

I argue that both films do exactly this, challenging the heteropatriarchal dominance of world-views and filmic narratives through acts of rebellion similar to hooks' oppositional gaze which, she asserts, is an act of resistance.³⁷ hooks develops the Black feminist notion of an oppositional gaze in response to white supremacist, patriarchal mainstream cinema. She demonstrates that the Black female gaze in the US is both resistant and rebellious, the act of looking having been punished in African American people for centuries. She explains that the Black woman spectator can hold this deconstructive power which critiques representation of blackness on film, and which has led directors to go on to create Black feminist cinema. Despite *Temblores* and *Clara Sola* not hailing from Hollywood or taking place in the US, I argue that the tenets of hooks' argument hold true for these films in a different context as rather than looking as an act of resistance, their actions embody their rebellion. hooks states that it was 'those Black women whose identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order, [who] were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze',³⁸ and *Temblores* and *Clara Sola* certainly take on an oppositional stance to heteropatriarchal cinematic and social norms. Just like the directors considered by hooks, I contend that these Central American directors also:

[...] act to critically intervene and transform conventional filmic practices, changing notions of spectatorship. [They] employ a deconstructive filmic practice to undermine existing grand cinematic narratives [...]they do not simply offer diverse representations, they imagine new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity.³⁹

36 Coon, 'God vs Gay', 180.

37 See hooks, *Black Looks*.

38 hooks, *Black Looks*, 127.

39 hooks, *Black Looks*, 130.

It is these practices of creating sympathetic characters whose gazes we, the spectator, share in, which then allow us entry to the new worlds that they have created so they can live out their own personal freedoms and thus mobilize in resistance.

While joining in Pablo and Clara's participatory gaze, we experience these acts of rebellion against the constraints of the heteropatriarchal world which they inhabit. Ya'ara Gil-Glazer argues that 'the visual construction of public space renders it extremely heterosexual' and it is this space against which Pablo rebels, removing himself from it both physically and emotionally.⁴⁰ This is a conscious choice on behalf of director Bustamante, and as part of the process of making this film he interviewed twenty-two gay men in Guatemala about their experiences, eventually forming the character of Pablo out of their stories.⁴¹ Indeed, according to Diane Bracco, in the closing credits he dedicates the film 'a todos los "Pablos" que compartieron con [él] su historia y que se han recuperado de los tratamientos anti-homosexuales, aceptándose y amándose tal y como son'.⁴² This semi-ethnographic stance, shared with the viewer after they have felt Pablo's pain at the end of the film, creates a bond of resistance with the real-life Pablos interviewed by Bustamante in Guatemala.

This resistance is also created through the recuperation of Pablo's voice which is lost when faced with his family. As soon as he leaves the confines of the dark family home, seeking refuge with Francisco in a gay bar, he is no longer the persecuted man in anguish that he was only moments before. He now uses his voice clearly for the first time in the film stating that 'saben que me voy. Lo peor de todo es que no me siento tan mal; la vergüenza no me siento'. That these are Pablo's first clearly decipherable words in the film imbue them with power especially given the context of Pablo leaving his upper-class social standing. Kaja Silverman, in her work on masculinities, contends that men saying no to having power is a form of deviant masculinity in itself, shown here by leaving his financial and family security behind when he moves in with Francisco.⁴³ Later, when visiting his family, once again we see the spatial divide between Pablo, who is positioned alone on one side of the shot, and his family, who stand together facing him. While his mother constantly refers to God and the Bible, asking him to repent, Pablo harnesses the voice that his brief

40 Ya'ara Gil-Glazer, ' "Manly" and Effeminate, Wretched and Whole: Formulating Gender Identity through Stills and Film', in *Gender and Visual Literacy*, ed. Edna Barromi-Perlman, Tal Dekel & Dorit Barchana-Lorand, *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 40:3–4 (2021), 189–95 (p. 189).

41 See Bracco, 'Indio, hueco, comunista', 11.

42 Bracco, 'Indio, hueco, comunista', 11.

43 See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

encounter with freedom has given him, first replying that ‘si Dios me hizo así es porque así tiene que ser’. Despite his mother’s protestations, Pablo goes on to use religious imagery to argue his case, stating that his first meeting with Francisco was like a divine encounter. Here, the significance of his own name—Pablo, or Paul in English—comes into play. Just as Paul in the biblical story was struck blind by his encounter with the divine, having his sight restored leading him to profess his faith, here we see that Pablo realized he had been living in darkness until he met Francisco, only coming to see what true freedom and light is for him when he acknowledges both his sexuality and his relationship. The importance of the oppositional gaze is hinted at here, as when Pablo allows himself to see clearly, it signifies rebellion against his family and religion.

This freedom is short-lived, however, and undergoing conversion therapy and moving back to his family home feels like a failure for him in the film. However, I contend that Halberstam’s theorization of the queer art of failure comes into play in some ways here. Halberstam notes that:

[...] while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life.⁴⁴

We are certainly invited to experience Pablo’s despair alongside him through the participatory gaze, but the ‘positivity of contemporary life’—or religious life inside the Church as it is portrayed in this film—is what is constructed as toxic here. In the final scenes he attends a church service with his family, becoming part of the besuited mass, going through the motions but once again appearing numb to his surroundings. After the service, the camera and his daughter follow him to the bathroom, once more with the grey-blue overlay symbolic of his melancholy and confinement. Pablo, the spectator, and his daughter are aware that he has failed to live out his transgressive possibilities for freedom as he looks in the mirror and the end credits roll. While Pablo’s initial perceived failure in the eyes of society is in leaving his family and not being the husband and father that society dictates, his actual failure is much more poignant and involves not living out his freedoms with Francisco.

This oppositional stance is also evident in *Clara Sola*. Clara, unlike Pablo, has never been beholden to the social norms imposed on her. In Clara, the spectator sees a protagonist use her agency and experiment with her sexuality without shame, despite the rebukes of her mother. Laura Mulvey has contended that, ‘femininity is [...] understood as a signifier of the

44 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

sexual', but here that sexuality is entirely destabilised. Clara is not styled for a heterosexual male gaze and her sexual encounters are clearly for her own erotic pleasure, not for the spectator.⁴⁵ Rather, she conforms visually more to the tomboy of Halberstam's various encapsulations of female masculinity as she is presented with no make-up, messy hair framing her prominent jawline and her face naturally lined. That she is entirely unashamed of her body is evident in several scenes, for example when she touches herself while sitting with María and Fresia watching television on the sofa, or when she asks her teenage nephew if they should practise kissing. She is also not embarrassed by the bodies or sexualities of others, and she stares at María's body in the shower, spies on María and Santiago as they kiss or have sex, and is unmoved when she walks in on her cousin watching porn and masturbating. When she begins to menstruate and blood drips down her leg when she is out walking with Santiago, she merely takes the tissue he offers her and wipes it up. The ways in which feminist film theory argues that woman was presented on screen in the 1970s is completely subverted by Clara here, who is far from the sexualized and sexual object theorized by Mulvey.⁴⁶ Rather, she comes closer to what Mulvey calls 'the body in everyday life' which, she states, 'is very different from the body circulated in images'.⁴⁷

While the rebellious nature of Clara's presentation is apparent throughout the film, there are three key scenes of rebellion. While Fresia tells Clara what to wear, what to do and how to act throughout the film, the scene which is most representative of this treatment comes towards the *dénouement* at María's *quinceañera* party. On stage, a traditional shoe changing ceremony is announced, and we see Fresia change María's shoe from a flat ballet pump to a high heel to symbolize her entry into womanhood. The camera immediately cuts from María buckling up her new shoes to Clara's feet under the table, showing the flat shoes she has never been allowed to exchange. Her stealing of the high heels in the previous scene is given more weight, seen now as a desperate plea to be allowed to grow up. Not having been permitted to cross that threshold, Clara makes for the bathroom and asks to borrow someone's lipstick—make-up being another element of adulthood that Fresia has denied her. As soon as she walks onto the dancefloor, however, her mother

45 Laura Mulvey, 'Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object', in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, ed. Anna Backman Rogers & Laura Mulvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U. P., 2015), 17–26 (p. 22).

46 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 6–18.

47 Laura Mulvey quoted in Roberta Sassatelli, 'Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28:5 (2011), 123–43 (p. 132).

intercepts her, telling her she cannot dance with Santiago and takes a tissue to wipe it off.

The second key moment of rebellion shows Clara finally able to free herself from her mother's constraints and enjoy a sexual climax that is for her and no one else. After spying on María and Santiago having sex one night, she walks into the forest alone and lies in a bed of moss at the foot of a tree and begins to masturbate. Bright fireflies surround her, their light illuminating the scene with fluorescent specks, getting brighter as she climaxes. The scene is at once magical and idyllic, the camera focusing on Clara and her pleasure but not depicting her body in graphic detail. It is reminiscent of the aptly titled Chilean film *La Luciérnaga* (Ana María Hermida, 2015) which also uses the firefly as a metaphor for the inner self set free. In Karol Valderrama-Burgos' fascinating analysis of this film, she states that it challenges the idea of woman as lack as 'it shows the pursuit of orgasm as something fully in the hands of the woman to recognise and explore the self'.⁴⁸ Here, Clara displays the same awareness of her own body and pursues the exploration of her sexuality as she pleases and not as religion—or her mother—dictates. This is in line with Isherwood's contention that theology, or the feminist study of religion, 'refuses the dualism of sacred and profane [...] it also assumes a freedom in one's body that has rarely been the case for women and so in this way is revolutionary'.⁴⁹ Reading this scene as reminiscent of theologians calls for a new view of religion and sexuality at the site of the female body, Clara becomes a vessel for a different sort of revolution to the one her mother desires for her.

The final scene of her rebellious acts takes place at the film's end when she faces a similar choice to that of Pablo: to live outside the boundaries of heteropatriarchal society she must renounce all that she has previously known and, in her case, literally burn it all to the ground. This finale is also reminiscent of Halberstam's notion of queer failure, as:

[...] from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.⁵⁰

48 Karol Valderrama-Burgos, 'Transgressive Female Sexuality and Desire in Contemporary Colombian Cinema: Hermida's *La luciérnaga* and Rodríguez's *Señoritas*', in *Gender, Sexuality, Film, and Media in Latin America*, ed. Wilson & Garavelli, *Latin American Perspectives*, 48:2 (2021), 108–22 (pp. 117–18).

49 Lisa Isherwood, 'Body Politics: A Theological Issue?', in *Religion and Sexuality*, ed. Hayes, Porter & Tombs, 350–65 (p. 363).

50 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 4.

Clara does not succeed at becoming the woman her mother and society desire of her—the stand-in for the Virgin Mary on Earth. In the final scenes, after she has ruined María's party with her outburst and in the aftermath of the earthquake, Clara wakes in the morning and goes to the prayer room. She stands in front of the large icon of the Virgin and puts her burnt hand over the candle, staring into the icon's face daring her to meet her eye. The Virgin stands resolute, with her gaze elsewhere. Clara takes the lighted candle and lies it down on the tablecloth, her eyes still on the Virgin as everything around her is set alight. Now the icon turns vengeful eyes on Clara, a tear falling down the statue's painted face. Clara watches the fire burn impassively until, nearly engulfed by flames, she departs into the forest unseen, ignoring the cries of María and Fresia for her to get out of the house. Undressing next to the river, she enters in her underwear before standing up straight, performing with her own body the operation denied to her by mother as the viewer hears the bones in her spine click loudly into place. Finally standing straight and tall, she looks up to see Yuca framed by sunlight among the trees on the other side of the river. The camera suddenly cuts to a long shot where the river is empty, her clothes lying in a pile on the bank. The questions of what has happened in the 'real' world of the film abound—has Clara died in the fire? Drowned in the water? Or merged with another world where she is free and Yuca is alive? Clara's destruction of the world which has confined her again goes back to Halberstam's idea of failure, as they coin the term 'shadow feminism' as taking, 'the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating'.⁵¹ The ambiguous ending here indicates the possibility of Clara becoming, being, and doing, but at the same time spells out her undoing of family life, the family home and the violation of religious imagery in her revolutionary act. Although not a passive act, her radical passivity throughout the film, in Halberstam's words, 'allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference' which then culminates in her powerful, rebellious finale.⁵²

Both of these films therefore play with the conventions of the Hollywood film which demands an order-disorder-order restored formula. Instead, *Temblores* and *Clara Sola* undercut this narrative framework to make disorder—as it is seen in the normative societies of the films—the desired outcome. They pit personal and sexual freedom against the heteropatriarchal constraints of religion, placing the viewer firmly on the side of the protagonists who must battle against injustice to achieve their freedom. This is done through the use of the participatory gaze, the creation of new worlds in which the spectator is invited to participate and

51 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 4.

52 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 144.

the oppositional acts which spark the fire of rebellion in Pablo, Clara and the viewer alike. While we are encouraged to feel a sense of catharsis when watching Clara burn to the ground the heteropatriarchal boundaries that confine her, the final scenes of *Temblores* are imbued with a sense of sadness and melancholy, made even more poignant by the post-script reminder of the true stories which lie behind this fictional narrative.*

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