Chapter 9.

"El Mundo iluminado, y yo despierta." Screening Sor Juana in the Films of Bemberg and Pereda.

Ben Bollig.

Literary life has proved a popular subject for filmmakers over the years: poets in particular have become the fictionalized protagonists for biographical pictures or historical dramas.[1] The question that occupies this chapter is what happens to the literary work when the writer becomes the subject of the filmmaker's attentions. As Speranza (2002) argues, it is perfectly possible to screen such a story – particularly that of a colourful or controversial poet – without producing a 'poetic' film, in any understanding of the term. Here we compare a film from Argentina and a Mexico/Canada co-production, both based on the life and works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: *Yo, la peor de todas* (*I, the Worst of All,* María Luisa Bemberg, 1990); and *Todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba* (*All Things Were Now Overtaken by Silence,* Nicolás Pereda, 2009).[2]

The films differ in genre, style, mood and, in particular, the role that poetry plays in their structure and *mise en scène*. Bemberg's film is a 'biopic', a relatively straightforward retelling of key moments in the life of the Mexican nun, based heavily on Octavio Paz's 1982 biography, but one that nevertheless makes significant use of intertextual and intermedial resources in its cinematography. Pereda's, in contrast, is difficult to classify, playfully evasive, 'slow' or perhaps 'contemplative', and with

[1] I would like to thank Alice Brooke for her help with bibliography on Sor Juana. Oliver Noble Wood read a draft of this chapter and I am most grateful to him for a number of very helpful suggestions, and also to an anonymous peer reviewer for their positive contribution. All errors and omissions are mine and mine alone.

[2] There is another film of the life of the nun (played by Andrea Palma), *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,* directed by Ramón Peón, from 1935. *Constelaciones* (dir. Alfredo Joskowicz, 1979) deals with the figures of both Sor Juana and her compatriot and peer Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. Also worth noting is the recent Mexican Netflix series, *Juana Inés* (2016). These fall beyond the scope of this study. For a detailed insight into the state of Sor Juana studies, see Herón Pérez Martínez (2008).

a cultivated aesthetic of error or even failure. How, we ask, do these films present the works in question? To put it another, more literary way, what reading of the poems do they offer?

Yo, la peor de todas.

Yo, la peor de todas (henceforth *YPT*), directed by María Luisa Bemberg (1922-1995), is an account of the life of the Mexican poet and nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Juana Inés de Asbaje, 1648-1695), adapted from Octavio Paz's biography, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o, Las trampas de la fe* (*Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith,* 1982; English translation Paz 1988).[3] As John King puts it, the film is an 'exploration of a creative woman, and perhaps a woman in love with another woman, crushed by powerful men who were her patrons or confessors' and demonstrates the filmmaker's 'continued interest in transgressive women' (2000: 266). *YPT* focuses on Sor Juana's struggles with the Mexican Church hierarchy and on her amorous friendship with her patron and protector, the vicereine, María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Condesa de Paredes. For Rosa Sarabia, the film offers a 'reelaboration' or 'restitution' of Sor Juana, essentially in feminist terms (2002: 121).[4]

YPT operates in the genre or sub-genre known as the biopic (or bio-pic). This is not an uncontroversial form.[5] For Belén Vidal, the genre's 'central problem' is what she calls its 'middlebrow-ness': 'its delivery of consensual pleasures related to formal conservatism and a simplified understanding of historical agency and identity' (2014: 20). There are, too, particular problems with depicting women's lives on screen. As Dennis Bingham observes, '[b]iopics of women […] are weighed

[3] On Bemberg's use of other sources, including the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, see Forte and Miranda (2000: 64-66).

[4] Unless otherwise stated in the bibliography, all translations are by the author.

[5] These are also known as 'biofilms'. Vidal observes the 'heavy Euro-American slant of biopic studies' (2014: 23); it is hoped that this chapter will contribute in small part to addressing this bias.

down by myths of suffering, victimization and failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm. Female biopics can be made empowering only by a conscious and deliberate application of a feminist point of view' (2010: 10). Denise Miller argues that 'Bemberg has taken feminist liberties with Paz' (2000: 145). In stressing her existence as a woman, Bemberg 'de-nuns' the protagonist (2000: 148) and thus, '[condenses] separate arguments [from Paz] to reinforce a feminist theme which is that the nun's betrayal is a conspiracy of misogynist men' (2000: 162-63). And while Paz's Sor Juana is a victim of local religious and political power struggles, for Miller, Bemberg's version is a victim of misogyny (2000: 152). As Sarabia puts it, 'Bemberg [vindicates] an image of an exemplary, historical, Latin-American woman, who suffered the vagaries ['avatares'] of a masculine and obscurantist society' (2002: 121). Perhaps as a result, *YPT* is structured with a falling narrative arc, from Juana's moment of greatest fame and success as a writer and intellectual, to her eventual solitude, abandonment and death. Appropriately, there is a starkness, a simplicity, to the film's *mise en scène* , with its set designs by Voytek (Wojciech Szendzikowski) and, as Nora B. Forte and Raquel Miranda (2000: 59) observe, an absence of exterior shots.

From the opening credits onwards, with their simple white-on-black letters, Bemberg foregrounds certain colour effects, such as the chiaroscuro of late renaissance and baroque portraiture, and in particular the works of Caravaggio – 'a heretical painter', in John Berger's words (2005: 82).[6] The painterly aspects of the film are obvious in the first scene, the meeting between the viceroy (Héctor Alterio) and the archbishop (Lautaro Murúa). They are shot in profile, in a highly stylized setting, with static side-on two-shots alternating with close-ups of the two men. The close-ups feature almost totally obscured backgrounds, the faces and clothing (for example the archbishop's white amice, or the viceroy's collar) picked out against the black. In a profile shot, the bright light of the central window

[6] And see Berger (2005: 80-86) for a broader reflection on the use of chiaroscuro in his painting.

plays against the darkness of the rest of the frame. Overall, the scene – a discussion of the situation of religion in Europe and New Spain – cultivates a sense of artificiality, of the superficial, of the importance of appearances; it contrasts starkly to the second scene, inside the vibrant, musical community of Sor Juana's convent. But again, in this more mobile, lively sequence, we have the intense black-white opposition of the nuns' habits, and also of the unlit arches in the background of the convent courtyard.

Figure 9.1. The interior of the convent in Bemberg's *Yo, la peor de todas* (1990)

This chiaroscuro, what Monika Kaup calls 'the use of extreme light-dark contrasts' (2014: 230), is a constant visual motif. It occurs in two-handed scenes, accentuating the drama of exchanges between, for example, Sor Juana (Assumpta Serna) and her confessor, Father Miranda (Alberto Segado), or the meeting at the bars of the locutory between the nun and her admirer and friend, the vicereine (Dominique Sanda). The chiaroscuro effect features too in crowd scenes: as the convent elects a new Mother Superior, a line of nuns in black and white habits snakes around the interior, and then up and down stairs, recalling the fantastical scenes of M.C. Escher. We then cut to Sor Juana, alone in her cell, lit only by a candle, a skull on her desk, in a very Caravaggio-esque memento mori that draws on, for example, the latter's portrait of St Jerome (*St Jerome Writing*, 1605-6, Galleria Borghese, Rome). When the Archbishop and other luminaries discuss Sor Juana's poetry, we see the black and white tiles of a floor that looks like a chessboard. Here, her poetry is as much a plot driver as an aesthetic element, motivating the intrigue that will eventually bring her down.

Bemberg uses chiaroscuro not just for visual purposes; in addition, we see scenes in which colours take on a symbolic value. Prior to the much-discussed kiss between the vicereine and Sor Juana, Dominique Sanda's character asks Assumpta Serna's to remove her veil. Under several layers of white fabric, Juana's bobbed black hair appears, a less well-coiffed version of her style as a lady-in-waiting (seen in flashback), when she enjoyed her first amorous kiss, duplicated now with the vicereine. Black, it

seems, is the colour of the material, of earthly passion; white that of Juana's religious calling. Yet, as in the chiaroscuro, they are inseparable. Soon Juana is heard reading a poem, 'off', 'Detente, sombra de mi bien esquivo' ('Stop, shadow of my elusive goodness', Sonnet 165) (De la Cruz 2004: 86). This piece specifically foregrounds *shadow* in moral questions and the importance of (chaste) 'fantasy' and imagination over physical love. In its final line, 'fantasy' creates a 'prison' for the beloved – somewhat ironically given Sor Juana's eventual cloistering, as depicted in the film.

Darkness frames Juana's eventual entrapment and death – in later scenes, as the convent is beset by sickness, we see Juana alone in her cell, a crucifix and a skull on her desk, books and scientific instruments invisible (foreshadowing their sacrifice at the close of the film), with only the watery light from the window to illuminate the frame, as the rain falls heavily outside. In the final shot, we see her, seated, in full habit, against the same window, in an intense chiaroscuro, the camera having panned across her empty cell, before closing on a medium shot of her seated, face blank or even traumatized, before the scene fades and an intertitle tells us she died soon after of the plague. This downbeat ending seems to counter the accusation of providing 'consensual pleasures', in Vidal's term. Instead, the film has a clear point to make about the damaging effects of patriarchy, and adopts an aesthetics based on the art and theatre of the period – Caravaggio and the *comedia nueva*, in particular.

Figure 9.2. Sor Juana (Assumpta Serna), from *Yo, la peor de todas* (1990)

For alongside these painterly elements, Bemberg's film also draws on theatre. One sees this in the sets – developed by a renowned stage designer – and in the inclusion in the film of part of a theatrical performance, *Los empeños de una casa* (*The House of Desires,* 1683), Sor Juana's play of thwarted love and mistaken identities. But it is difficult to separate out pintoresque and theatrical aspects in the movie. There occurs a blurring of boundaries between forms – from painting to theatre, via an important visual resource in the film, namely the tableau. Miller states that 'Bemberg […] keeps

her camera still, rendering her tableau effect even more pronounced. This effect of an underlined emotional intensity is felt all the more strongly in a modern cinema where tableaux are rare' (2000: 158). The tableau is, one must remember, primarily a theatrical device; here it is turned to filmic purposes, with a strongly painterly feel. The camera moves as if over a canvas; the actors pose as if paused on stage. Kaup states that, '*Yo, la peor de todas* straddles the paradigmatic opposition between the actual theater stage and the illusionist space-time of cinema' (2014: 228-29).

Sor Juana's poetry features in the film, but in very particular ways, and one can argue that the aesthetics of these appearances relate to the difficulty of both screening the writing process and 'adapting' poetry for film. In an early scene, when Sor Juana meets the viceregal couple at a performance of *Los empeños de una casa* staged in their honour in her convent, the viceroy quotes from one of her most famous poems, known as 'Hombres necios' ('Foolish Men', no. 92) (2004: 71-73). With the viceroy unable to finish the quotation, Juana herself comes into shot, from a reverse angle between the viceregal couple, to continue the poem. The shot, as she walks towards the camera, creates four planes: the aristocrats; Sor Juana; the actors of the play, chatting together after their performance; and the arches of the convent cloisters. It is hard to avoid seeing similarities with Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656, Prado, Madrid). While the camera is static, Sor Juana walks into the foreground, and into a triangle with the viceroy and the vicereine. The role of the poem here is more to move along the plot – developing in particular the relationship with the María Luisa – rather than to showcase the poetry.

Figure 9.3. Sor Juana and the viceregal couple (Héctor Alterio and Dominique Sanda), *Yo, la peor de todas* (1994)

Poems play a particular role in the development of the relationship between Sor Juana and the *virreina.* As Sarabia notes in her study:

> The kiss [between Sor Juana and the vicereine], a suggestively erotic visual image, makes explicit/condenses the verses of amorous passion that the nun-poet had written for her vicereine, but the feelings in question are inverted and made manifest in the vicereine, who takes the initiative. (2002: 126)

Actual evidence for any romantic attachment between the two is nonexistent; within the film's narrative it is implausible for Juana to seduce or even make a pass at the vicereine. Thus the inversion of which Sarabia writes, with the effusive sentiments of Juana's admiring poetry instead ascribed to Dominque Sanda's character, as seductress, allows Bemberg to advance her idea of a physical erotic link, initiated by María Luisa, between the two women. Again, poetry is used as source for narrative and the film's feminist in(ter)vention.

Bemberg's film opts for theatre and visual arts as resources, perhaps in preference to poetry. What few if any critics have noticed, beyond Sarabia's passing reference to film history, above (2002: 121), is that alongside its literary and painterly intertexts, *YPT* is well versed in the history of cinema. To give one example, the shot of Sor Juana after her confessor abandons her, following the violent argument with the archbishop, uses a double framing – of both the camera and the bars of the locutory. For Sarabia, this double framing 'reinforces the victimization of Sor Juana' (2002: 130). But for contemporary audiences, particularly those schooled in cinema and film criticism, there is another reason for this effect, namely that the sequence and the shot, which leave Sor Juana hanging from the bars, recall the end of a highly controversial travelling shot in Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1960), in which a female concentration camp prisoner jumps onto an electrified barbed wire fence, thus killing herself.[7] Can we not also see, in the convent setting, in the public confessions, and in the theatrically constructed sets, references to Carl Th. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc,* 1928),

[7] See e.g. Daney (2004).

another tale of a woman sacrificed to male religious and political power? While Bemberg resists the extreme close-ups of the earlier film, the use of theatrical settings and tableaux certainly are shared across the decades.

Similarly, there are further examples, of cinematic *self*-referentiality: the confessions, the sickbed scenes, and several other sequences, are all already found in other Bemberg films, such as *Camila* (1984). The smashing of Sor Juana's glasses recalls a series of shots involving blindfolds in *Camila;* likewise the scenes of censorship and book burning, in the earlier film depicting the nineteenth-century regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas but framed to recall events of the Argentine civic-military dictatorship of 1976-1983. They also foreshadow her last film as a director, *De eso no se habla* (*I Don't Want to Talk about It,* 1993)*,* where the bonfire is repeated in a darkly comic tone, as the mother of a young woman with dwarfism casts copies of *Snow White* and *Tom Thumb* into the flames.[8] The history of cinema, political cinema, and her own films, underlie the literary, artistic, and theatrical references. In a reverse of the expected order, we X-ray the surface of the baroque painting recreated in a 1980s movie to find a twentieth-century product: film. Thus another rhetorical trope of the Golden Age appears, the chiasmus: cinema – baroque art – cinema. As Forte and Miranda put it (albeit while making a semiotic point about the film), 'the history represented in the film goes beyond the sources used by Bemberg and creates its own referential object' (2000: 71).

And yet, to argue that the film overlooks Sor Juana's poetry risks slipping into clichés about fidelity, or about faithfulness to the (poetic) 'spirit' of a work or an artist, while at the same time overlooking the historical and cultural context of Sor Juana's own literary creations. In *YPT*, Bemberg foregrounds the inseparability of verse and drama for the Golden Age stage. The Calderonian theatre

[8] It may or may not be worth noting that *YPT* features a brief scene of two dwarves, wrestling in Aztec fancy dress, for the entertainment of the viceregal court.

that Sor Juana inherited and developed used verse just as modern film uses the soundtrack, working with, often bending, rules set out in Lope de Vega's guide to the new comedy, the *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (*The New Art of Writing Plays in this Age,* 1609). The links between painting and Golden Age theatre have long been recognized by critics.[9] Intermediality is not a new invention.

As noted above, *YPT* includes a brief snippet from the end of *Los empeños de una casa*. Like many Golden Age and late-baroque comedies, it deals with the pitfalls of a world of artifice and artificiality. A key scene of mistaken identities and conversations at cross-purposes takes place in pitch darkness; actors would have mimed their blindness for an audience in the light that could see.[10] Another important moment finds the servant Castaño cross-dressed as the lover Leonor. Similar crossings and mistaken identities are found too in Calderón, including one of great philosophical importance: that the world is a dream that is in turn the world – again, a chiasmus.[11] One thinks, too, in painting, of *Las Meninas*, with its exploration of artistic self-perception, in a painting whose subject is perhaps its own composition, and the place of this composition within the intricate political hierarchies of seventeenth-century court life. Its background consists of portraits owned by the king, a series of knowing artistic

[9] As María Asunción Gómez puts it, 'the interlinking of visual arts and theatre reaches a peak in the Spanish [*sic*] Golden Age that is only comparable to that of today. Allusions to works of art (paintings and sculptures mainly) abound in the seventeenth-century theatrical corpus, as well as the works' creators (real or fictitious); however, Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca are undoubtedly those who most insistently demonstrate in their writings this unusual concern for the visual arts', (1997: 273); 'Calderón and Lope's repeated allusions to painting, and especially to female portraiture, go far beyond the purely ornamental. They constitute intertextual reflections that underline the mimetic function of pictorial art and, implicitly, of dramatic art. […] Reflected in these works, therefore, is a constant concern (so baroque and so current) with drawing the dividing line between representation and the represented world, between appearances and reality' (1997: 289); from the earliest cinematographs, via Orson Welles, to the works of Bemberg and Pereda, this is a central concern, too, of filmmakers.

[10] This is a conjecture, but one based on Golden Age theatre practice generally (e.g. plays by law being performed during the hours of daylight) and the 2004 RSC production of the play in translation by Catherine Boyle.

[11] Both the *auto sacramental* (passion play), *El gran teatro del mundo* (*The Great Theatre of the World,* c.1634) and the *comedia, La vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*, 1635), explore the possibility of life on earth as essentially illusory, the performance of a role, or at least only a preparation or test for the more important hereafter. Darkness as the cause of mistaken identity also features in *El médico de su honra* (*The Surgeon* [alternatively *Physician*] *of His Honour*, 1637), when Pedro is mistaken by his wife Doña Mencía for the Prince, Enrique, who is surreptitiously courting her; in contrast to Sor Juana's work, terrible consequences ensue for the female lead.

intertexts. The play of looks and gazes, the sense of a court theatre being played out, is found again in *YPT*. The overall effect in the latter is that portraiture – baroque portraiture, in particular – comes to dominate the image, trumping poetry, to create the film's striking visual effect.[12] At the same time, we might ask, what more baroque poetic trait is there than literary self-reference? There is, though, an important difference: the Golden Age worldview, found in the plays of Calderón and the verse of Sor Juana, was underpinned by religious doctrine, debated and beset by controversies, no doubt, but with at least some shared assumptions: the existence of God, an afterlife, and possible salvation. These are not available to Bemberg; instead, her film rests on her feminist convictions and support for women's struggles, historical and present day.

Todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba.

Todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba (henceforth, *Todo*), directed by the Mexican-Canadian filmmaker Nicolás Pereda (b. 1982) offers a contrasting vision of Sor Juana and her work to that found in Bemberg's film. Pereda has a growing reputation, in particular in film journals (especially online) and on the festival circuit, and he is renowned for his slow, contemplative, and thought-provoking works. As Nadin Mai (2016) writes: '[Pereda] has always favoured long-takes, *temps mort*, and a very minimalist storytelling'.

[12] In Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2*, he reflects on the links between classic cinema and baroque portraiture. For Deleuze, the key figure is Orson Welles, in whose work, in particular through his use of depth of field, one encounters a 'radical change [to] the very notion of centre' (2005: 138); he thus takes up 'a transformation of thought which originally took place in […] the seventeenth century […] the baroque age par excellence' (138). In Bemberg's film, it is the use of chiaroscuro and tableaux that call to baroque portraiture. One is reminded, too, of Michel Foucault's analysis of Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* at the opening of *Les mots et les choses* (1966, *The Order of Things*), in which he writes, '[n]o gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity' (1994: 5); '[t]he entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene' (1994: 14). And yet, it is the sovereign who plays the key role: the royal couple, visible in the mirror at the back of the room, 'provide the centre around which the entire representation is ordered'. For Foucault, this sets the work in an earlier historical period to our own; Bemberg instead aims to show echoes and similarities between the colonial period and today.

Alongside this, Mai notes his use of 'an independent camera', a feature shared with other 'slow cinema' practitioners such as the Hungarian Tarr Béla or Argentina's Lisandro Alonso: 'the camera is not really following the protagonist […] the camera has its own mind and moves to whatever place or whatever action it would like to record'. Kieron Corless (2012: 62), writing of another of Pereda's films, states that 'we're never entirely sure if what we're watching is real or fictional, or some headspinning combination of the two', a judgement that, as shall be argued, may also be applied to *Todo*.[13]

Critics have also noted the extreme minimalism of Pereda's films (e.g. Gutiérrez 2012: 39). For Dan Russek the director forms part of a tendency in Mexican cinema away from melodrama – something strongly associated with its golden age of the 1940s, but also not alien to popular recent productions, such as director Carlos Carrera's *El crimen de Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Padre Amaro,* 2002) – 'the attenuation, the erasure, or the elision of emotions' (Russek 2012: 218). This is not an otiose choice, either, for, according to Russek, in Pereda's film *Perpetuum mobile*: 'the individual who, with traditional social models undermined, untied from community bonds, and orphaned from any collective project, cannot find in herself either the means to overcome their isolation' (2012: 228). Thus cinematic minimalism has a political edge to it, as shall be explored below.

Pereda is one of a number of Latin American filmmakers who produce what critics have labelled 'slow cinema' or 'slow movies', sometimes referred to as 'contemplative cinema'. Alongside Pereda, and another Mexican, Carlos Reygadas, Argentina's Lisandro Alonso is one of the region's most widely recognized practitioners of 'slow cinema'. His *oeuvre*, for Ira Jaffe, is characterized by a 'commitment to a sort of minimalism, detachment and indeterminacy' (2014: 115). There is in his works a resistance to fulfilling many of the most common expectations that spectators have of cinema, instead showing restraint: '[s]low movies […] inhibit the expression of […] feelings, just as they restrict motion, action,

[13] See also Manassero (2013: 52).

dialogue and glitter [*sic*]. Slow movies thus bring to the fore cheerless aspects of existence that are likely to worsen if ignored, but drape them in stillness, blankness, emptiness and silence' (Jaffe 2014: 9). What, then, is achieved by films that run so contrary to much commercial filmmaking, with its cultivation of speed, emotion, and escapism? For Jaffe, 'the mastery of form and the acuity of feeling that distinguish works of art, even when the subject matter is painful, have an uplifting rather than depressing effect on spectators alert to form and feeling' (2014: 9). What, one might ask, is 'uplifting' in Pereda?

For Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge 'slow films' are often characterized by 'strict adherence to realism and reality' (2016: 7). They also note the important links between contemporary slow or contemplative cinema and the availability of various digital technologies (in filming and reproducing) (2016: 11). They conclude – a point that is of particular relevance for Pereda's reworking of the work of Sor Juana – that 'a slow cinematic aesthetic […] encourages a mode of engagement with images and sounds whereby slow time becomes a vehicle for introspection, reflection and thinking' (2016: 16).

Todo is a film that draws on, that quotes, a poem: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Primero sueño* (*First Dream*, 1692). *Primero sueño* has an important role in Sor Juana's *oeuvre*: it is her longest poem; it is widely accepted as one of the few pieces that she wrote out of personal choice; and, in recent years, it has been the subject of no little critical speculation, some of it sparked by Paz's biography (1982) – not least because of the seeming mystery of what the poem describes. Marked by the influence of Luis de Góngora, in particular his *Soledades* (*Solitudes,* 1613), it is also a poem that critics have praised for its originality, in both aesthetic and philosophical terms.[14]

[14] And, as Frutos Esteban and García-Camino Mateos note, it has an important place in the history of the film-poetry nexus, containing – they claim – the first reference in Spanish literature to a proto-cinematic *linterna mágica* or magic lantern (2003: 27).

The title of Pereda's film is taken from lines 147-150 of the poem: 'El sueño todo, en fin, lo poseía; / todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba: / aun el ladrón dormía; aun el amante no se desvelaba' (In the end, sleep possessed everything / silence overtook, in the end, everything: / even the thief slept; even the lover was not awake). It is a phrase marked by typical baroque features: the hyperbaton separating verb and subject; the near chiasmus that arrays 'sueño' – 'en fin' – 'en fin' – 'silencio'; and the parallelism or parison of 'aun el ladrón' – 'aun el amante'. Although the poem is a *silva* – a freely rhyming, loosely distributed series of seven- and eleven-syllable lines – here there is full rhyme patterned ABaB. As Paz puts it, '[a]lthough constructed with deliberate and rigorous objectivity, *Primero sueño* is secretly shot through with a personal note […] a genuine intelectual confession' (1982: 496). *Primero sueño* recounts a journey: that of a soul freed from its body while the latter sleeps. Paz notes that in one aspect this is a trope typical of the era, but in others Sor Juana's differs from her models: '[t]he theme of the soul's journey is a religious theme and it is inseparable from [the idea of] a revelation. In Sor Juana's poem not only is there no demiurge: neither is there a revelation' (1982: 482). For Gerard Flynn, the poem shows that 'the soul cannot contemplate the cosmos without losing its sight. In trying to see everything the soul sees nothing' (1971: 27). This is a reading of the poem – as the story of a failure to achieve revelation through intellectual means – that is shared by many readers. As Andrés Sánchez Robayna puts it, '*Primero sueño* is the story of a failure: that which derives from the impossibility of knowledge ['conocer']' (1991: 215). Furthermore, this is '[a] failure of knowledge ['conocimiento'], but not of vision' (1991: 217).

Paz acknowledges this sense of defeat or failure. But there is a further, feminist note to his reading: '[t]he failure derives not from her sex but from the limits of human understanding' (1982: 497) – for souls of course do not have a sex. At the same time, he is keen to avoid reductive biographical readings: '[t]here is no doubt that the sudden awakening ends the dream, not the soul's intellectual adventure' (1982: 496). And here Paz seems to wish to redeem the poem, or at least to identify

something other than defeat and despair, as an example of Sor Juana's incessant, insatiable enthusiasm for knowledge. He finds its true novelty: '[i]t is a confession that ends in an act of faith: not in knowledge but in the desire for knowledge' (1982: 499). Thus *Primero sueño* goes beyond contemporary 'poesía del desengaño' ('poetry of disillusionment') because of its enthusiasm for further knowledge (Paz 1982: 500): '[w]ith *Primero sueño* there appears a new passion in the history of our [i.e. Spanish-language] poetry: love of knowledge ['saber']. […] What was new was that Sor Juana turned this passion into a theme for poetry' (1982: 504).

Aída Beaupied takes issue with Paz and others' reading of the *Sueño*. Whereas for Paz the poem inscribes an intellectual failure – although not one that brings despair – Beaupied, tracing the links between the poem and the hermetic tradition, argues instead that,

> In spite of the apparent absence of a revelation with which the poem seems to conclude, several clues in *Primero sueño* suggest the presence of doubly hermetic revelations; that is to say, hermetic because of their Hermeticist content, and also because they are hermetically hidden. (1996: 753)

In a longer, comparative study, Beaupied insists that 'nor is the fact that the poem does not openly declare its message a sign that it does not contain one, particularly if we are dealing with an esoteric message' (1997: 12). What is especially important is the role of the reader in completing or filling the many silences – which most critics agree are present in the work (1997: 23). Beaupied argues that the poem contains coded references to scholastic and neoplatonic philosophy, and presents theories about knowledge and ideas of 'transgression and its punishment' (1997: 59). If there is pessimism, or frustration on display in the poem, it is not because knowledge is impossible, but because 'el saber no se puede comunicar' ('knowledge cannot be communicated') (1997: 67). One might add that this is not only for philosophical reasons: it must also be related to the limits of what one in Sor Juana's position in

her particular society – with the risks of religious censure or punishment at the hands of the Inquisition – might say or commit to paper.

Even if we do not agree with Beaupied's hard thesis and her somewhat esoteric reading of the poem, to regard it as recounting simply a failure of the intellectual project is to overlook its context in both biographical and socio-political terms. Here, readings that focus on aesthetic aspects of the poem can be of use, in particular when we consider its cinematic adaptation. For Paz, too, Sor Juana in *Primero sueño* 'sets out to describe a reality that, by definition, is not visible' (1982: 470). This paradox is vital for understanding Pereda's film: '[t]he poem is the story of a spiritual vision that ends in a non-vision ['una no-visión']' (1982: 482). There is thus a "double negation" in the poem: 'the silence of great spaces and the vision of the non-vision. Here lies the great originality of Sor Juana's poem' (1982: 482). Pereda's film aims to screen this encounter between intellectual enthusiasm, the vision that is not a vision, and the limits of the sayable – and allows us to rethink Sor Juana's 'failure'.

Todo begins with some 40 seconds of darkness, in which rather indistinct voices are (just about) audible on the soundtrack. After a minute, a black and white image slowly appears – a static medium-long shot of a person lying down, still, with a circle of brightness – perhaps the moon, perhaps a spotlight – over their head. As the illumination steadily increases, we are able to see more: the figure is a woman, dressed in religious habit, and to the left, spoiling the integrity of the painterly tableau, is a member of the film crew, experimenting with a light. Voices discuss angles and lighting, while the figure remains static on a raised table or dais. Two minutes in, there is a cut, the camera angle moving 90-degrees to view what seems to be the same scene, now looking directly at the top of the actor's head. Now the light comes from one, possibly two candles and a spotlight, the former not visible in the previous shot. This opening sequence establishes some of the film's key motifs and techniques: self-referentiality; plays with light and shadow; and a very flexible attitude to continuity editing.

The film is indeed marked by a certain slowness – but not in all respects does it follow the aesthetic model of, for example, Lisandro Alonso. There are plentiful long takes – shots tend to last around a minute, sometimes longer, and there is very limited camera movement. Also, there is very little action in the shot – the protagonist, played by Jesusa Rodríguez, is often still, standing, sitting, lying down, or waiting. What movement there is – not of the camera, but of what is filmed – takes place 'backstage', behind the camera, as it were: the comings and goings of crew and others present, including janitors and security staff, as the off-screen comes on-screen.

This appearance of members of the crew and others involved in the production or staging of the work on or around the screen is part of the film's overt self-referentiality. In a sense, *Todo* is a 'making-of' for a film that does not exist – rather like watching the DVD extras but without having the film itself. Throughout, what we see and hear on screen contains multiple comments about the process of filmmaking itself – acting, blocking, lighting, and camera work. Indeed alongside Rodríguez's performed readings of the poem, the entire vocal track consists of comments about the process of staging and filming itself, either from the crew or Rodríguez herself.

Likewise, much of the action – if that is the correct word, for the film itself treats 'action'/'acción' with some irony – consists of the filming of the film itself. Equipment – particularly lights, but also cameras – is moved around and adjusted by various members of the crew. Rodríguez alters her props or costume, in between those relatively brief sequences in which she performs as Sor Juana. Even these are tentative or abortive – attempting a particular movement or way of acting, to see whether it will work, and discovering, at least in Rodríguez's opinion, that it does not. Rodríguez herself divides her time in the film between three activities: reading the words of Sor Juana's *Primero sueño*; waiting quietly, patiently, and stilly, while the team make adjustments around her; and commenting on either her own performance or its *mise en scène*.

One notes also the presence of screens on screen, monitors on which we see another angle on the action – or lack of – or the rushes of something that has been previously filmed. This, along with the strong impression that often we are witnessing a rehearsal, reinforces the feeling that as spectators we are always looking from the wrong point of view. On 16 minutes, we see a side-angle medium shot, the lighting of which leaves the right-hand side of the frame – including Rodríguez's face and hands – in near total darkness. As she reads – 'el manjar transformado' ('the delicacy transformed', *Primero sueño,* line 838) – she appears to raise and consume a communion wafer, but this action is almost wholly obscured. Both as herself and in character as Sor Juana, Rodríguez often appears to be addressing someone other than us, the viewers; even when she performs 'to camera', it is to a camera other than the one through which we are viewing. At about ten minutes, we watch a grainier version, from a different angle, of the sequence that we have just seen, doubly mediating the image. On other occasions, when we do get to see the 'right' shot, it is mediated again, for example shown on a blurry monitor, or lit in such a way as to partially obscure the screen.[15]

The film makes use of recognizable images from what might be called the 'iconography' of Sor Juana. Just as Bemberg recreates certain tableaux, Pereda stages, or partially stages shots that mirror famous images of the nun. For example, in one sequence, we see Rodríguez as Juana sitting at her desk with her papers, close to one of the most famous and oft-reproduced historical images of her – in fact it appears in Bemberg's earlier film. But at the same time, these are interrupted – by the boom mic and the monitor that intrude from the right. We also see sequences in which Rodríguez 'performs' elements of the poem: erecting the pyramids (using a tablecloth) or consuming the celestial 'manjar' – in this case a host. But these scenes too are scotched: partially or almost wholly obscured, or interrupted by the

[15] There is one further moment of simultaneous obscurity and self-reference: *Todo* appears to have been filmed in the Foro Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, at the National Autonomous University, in Mexico City – one shot, from floor level, briefly shows the word 'Juana' printed on the floor, and what might be the rest of her name away at an angle. But it is not clear, and one can only infer this from contextual information.

protagonist and the crew's often critical commentary. Related to this is the way sections of the poem are read and that reading filmed – the *mise en scène* of the poetic performance, as it were. For example, one sequence of around 30 seconds consists of almost total darkness on screen – broken only when a monitor flashes into view – and discussions about framing and movement are heard. Rodríguez then begins to read, from around line 540 of *Primero sueño* onwards. We see just a small image in a monitor, itself multiply reflected and lit by little more than a candle, as she declaims Sor Juana's words about 'un concepto confuso' ('a confused concept') and 'el informe embrión' ('formless embryo', lines 548-9). The image has prefigured – ironically, even comically – the reading of the poem.

There is a linked tendency in the film towards moments of *mise en abîme*. In the exterior scenes that begin in the last third of the film, we see Rodríguez fully costumed in period religious habit – indeed a copy of the dress worn by the nun in the most frequently reproduced images of her. In those images, the religieuse is often depicted with an oval emblem, or *escudo*, on the front of her habit, including a biblical image. In *Todo,* the religious image appears to be – although given the lighting one cannot be wholly certain – that of Sor Juana herself, on the round emblem that Rodríguez wears on her chest. The image is – as one by now might well expect – not clear or large enough for us to see whether that Sor Juana has another Sor Juana depicted on her chest, and so on, and so on.[16]

As mentioned above, 'slow' movies are characterized by their apparent commitment to reality and realism – seeming to follow a line sketched out by André Bazin (1967) and Gilles Deleuze (2005) in their studies of the sequence shot and the 'time-image', respectively – both related to the oft-cited 'indexical' realist function of cinema. And yet, despite the many 'slow' features of *Todo*, this

[16] The *escudo* was relatively common in nuns' portraiture in this period; in most Sor Juana portraits, the image is the Annunciation, with the Archangel Gabriel on the right, Mary on the left, and the Holy Spirit as a dove above them. Alice Brooke (2019) has suggested (personal communication via email), that this references the mediaeval tradition of portraying Mary at the Annunciation reading a book, as she is in all the known *escudos* in Sor Juana portraits. See also Perry (2012).

commitment to reality and realism is treated with no little playfulness. Pereda himself, quoted in Carlos Gutiérrez *et al.* (2012: 40) stated 'I'm not interested in capturing reality; I'm interested in talking about it. Realism and hyperrealism have nothing to do with this'. Firstly, although what we see on screen is characterized by many realist touches – diegetic sound and lighting; the presence of non-actors; errors and imperfections – it is never wholly clear *what* we are actually watching. Is this a rehearsal for a play? Is it the making of another film? If this is *real*, what is the *fiction* with which it would contrast? Contextual information makes it clear that this *real* is *also* the fiction – the making-of is the subject of the making-of (and so on – like the image of Sor Juana on the emblem on the dress of the actor playing Sor Juana, and so forth – another *mise en abîme*).

Secondly, the film has a surprising lightness of touch, incorporating ironic and humorous moments, that undermine the seriousness often associated with slow movies and their realism. For example, around seven minutes in, the directorial cry of 'Acción' is followed immediately by precisely the *absence* of any action. Again, on 39 minutes, the same instruction is followed immediately by a cut to black and almost complete silence. One might read these sequences as a comment on the film's status – for in a making-of, it is *not* the action of the film-proper that follows the director's instructions. But beyond such meta-filmic comment, one detects a certain, very subtle humour – the same that might be encountered in other provocative, self-referential documentaries from Latin America, such as Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (*The Blonds,* Argentina, 2003), or thinking back further, Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's corrosively funny *Agarrando pueblo* (*The Vampires of Poverty,* Colombia, 1977).

Part of the film's distinctive aesthetic is its presentation to the viewer of scenes framed so as to give little indication of how one might react. As with the 'deadpan' comedy of, for example, Fernando Eimbcke (e.g. *Temporada de patos* [*Duck Season*], Mexico, 2004) or Argentina's Martín Rejtman, there are long, inexpressive takes here that, almost as a result of the lack of any obvious reaction, inspire

(quiet) laughter. One thinks of the extended shot of a slightly kitsch shrine – it seems to the Virgin Mary – including a crucified Christ alongside flashing fairy lights. This is realism, and it is reality, but in the absence of indications – through reaction shots or montage – to the spectator as to how to react, one very likely response is humour.

Figure 9.4. Shrine from Nicolás Pereda's *Todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba* (2009)

Indeed throughout the film, one has a sense that, subtly, something of an aesthetic of failure is being sketched, with an attendant, deadpan, sense of humour. In a film ostensibly adapted from a poem, the readings from it are worthy of comment: sections from the *Primero sueño* appear in no particular order, reinforcing the impression that this is a making-of. They also start and end as if at random. This creates a strong sense of interruption, even failure. Indeed failure is a clear motif here, as lines are forgotten, lighting does not quite work, angles are wrong, and costumes malfunction. One is reminded of Jack Halberstam's reflection on failure as 'alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends' (2011: 24); that 'under certain circumstances failing […] may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world' (2011: 2). Or, as Cecilia Macon puts it in her work on Albertina Carri, an aesthetic of failure allows artists to be 'willful without being optimistic' (2018: 409).

Even in those scenes that demonstrate a certain theatricality, this dramatic effect is quickly undercut. For example, at around 21 minutes, Rodríguez reads a section from *Primero sueño* (beginning at line 340) describing the pyramids of Egypt, having erected their form with the cloth and then taken a striking position atop the table. The tone of her voice changes – projected more, with a seriousness in the phrasing and cadence: this is clearly acting, not conversation. As spectators we can infer a dramatic performance, but the position of the camera, the combined darkness and extreme brightness of the shot, and the presence of monitors, another camera, and crew members on the edge of the scene, all

distance us as spectators from those (putative subjects) fully immersed in a dramatic performance or fictional film. There is music, and dramatic music at that. And yet everything points to interruption and failure. After Rodríguez breaks off, she comments on her own performance: the pyramids take several attempts, and they do not stay up very well. She then comments on her disappointment with the results of this performance.

In another sequence, Rodríguez gets her lines wrong as she declaims from the poem. This is followed by a discussion of whether this mistake can be cut in the final version – a final version that of course does not exist. In a further sequence, on 33 minutes, we see her draped in a sheet, which she then waves with her arms to become the sails of a ship, accompanying or dramatizing her reading of the poem (from line 560), just as the building of pyramids had done earlier. But our view is from behind her, with much of the scene in shadow, and a bright spotlight, near the centre of the frame, obscuring much of the scene. As she casts herself down onto the stage floor, dramatic music plays from off, discordant strings, menacing percussion, and then a female operatic solo voice. But again, we are watching the action from behind, from backstage. There is a cut, to a different angle – still behind the actor, who stands up and walks towards the stage exit, while a rather threatening cello plays. But then we hear 'corte' ('cut') and a discussion of how better to perform the scene, in which both Rodríguez and an invisible director give their directions. Again, the film shows and then hides its hand, as if striving to undermine itself.

Towards the end of *Todo*, as rain falls, the combination of water droplets and the bokeh effect almost totally obscure any action. On 56 minutes, the camera jerks and ends facing down. We hear the sound of feet and the downpour, and someone asks someone else if the camera has got wet. The closing minutes of the film show heavy rain, with the accompanying noise on the soundtrack – one assumes that filming has had to finish for the day, although of course this camera carries on recording. The final

close up is of raindrops and water on the floor, and what look like discarded extension cable connectors: a striking image of a film shoot interrupted.

While the film works hard to undermine itself, the casting of Jesusa Rodríguez as Sor Juana is an important and telling decision on the part of Pereda. Rodríguez is an actor and political activist, and an elected Senator for the left-wing MORENA party. She has played and impersonated Sor Juana on a variety of occasions in the past, often as politically charged theatre or as a public intervention. As Diana Taylor (2017: 78) writes, with her artistic partner (and wife) Liliana Felipe, '[t]heir performatic interventions have interrupted Mexico's social and political life with their queer, feminist performance practice and activist work over 30 years'. Rodríguez supported Andrés Manuel López Obrador (aka AMLO) – now president – in the controversial 2006 elections (Taylor 2017: 85). 'She took over the choreography of AMLO's massive recount campaign that led to a popular occupation of the Zócalo and Reforma […]. Reading rooms, pop-up museums and art spaces, outdoor cinemas, and many other forms of public expression became active along the route of resistance' (2017: 85). Taylor also notes that '[Rodríguez] found herself using the words of the famous seventeenth-century nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to talk about corruption: "robbery, repeated, is never petty"' (86). She has more than a little in common with the role that she plays in this film, as Taylor puts it: '[w]hile it seems that Mexican officials tolerate the critique from these artists, the pair have been censored, shut down, and threatened for their comments about the Catholic Church, Mexican politicians, and other corrupt or repressive forces in the country' (2017: 81).

In a film marked by its restraint and lack of, or ironic attitude towards, theatricality, this is an extraordinary performance by Jesusa Rodríguez. One sequence, lasting over a minute, sees her naked from the waist up, practicing painting on her arms and torso. She runs through her lines and nibbles on what appears to be a communion wafer. In the next shot, in close up, we see her cleaning off ink or

paint, discussing the merits of dirtying a nightgown with make-up. In many sequences, it is clear that Rodríguez calls the shots, directing the staging and shooting of the action. We are implicitly watching the filming of *another* performance, one put together by Rodríguez (and her collaborators, perhaps).

What, then, of the overwhelming *darkness* that characterizes so much of this film? Often nothing is shown on screen, or very little at all is visible. The lighting that is used, or is present, often does not illuminate, but rather blinds. One possible cause is that the lighting is not only diegetic, but also second-hand – not designed to light the film that we are seeing, but for *another* performance or shooting. The final third of the film moves outside, and the Torre Latinoamericana (one of the most recognizable and famous buildings in Mexico City) comes into view. [17] The camera pans to reveal Rodríguez, now in full costume as Sor Juana. It then pulls back to reveal a chapel or church. The evening or night-time filming is accompanied by very bright lights. The effect of these apes the chiaroscuro of her habit. The instruction from the director is that she should move so that she creates a 'gran sombra' ('big shadow') as she exits. As the protagonist approaches the lights, the white on her costume turns almost fluorescent, burnt out bright on the film. After checking with the crew that the shot is to their satisfaction, she then proceeds to repeat the manoeuvre. Alongside the play with light, and with (our, the spectators') vision, again the idea of a definitive version of the film is called into question – or at least we are reminded that there is no definitive version, because we are watching it, and what we are seeing often exceeds the capacity of our vision.

Figure 9.5. Jesusa Rodríguez as Sor Juana in Nicolás Pereda´s *Todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba* (2009)

A corollary to this play of light and blindness in the film is its approach to silence. In a film that portrays, or screens, a version of a poem that deals with a vision that is too powerful for us to behold,

[17] It is also the setting for the climax of Alonso Cuarón's first feature film, *Sólo con tu pareja* (1991).

we are left with blinding illumination and a series of silences. Hence the bright lights throughout; hence also the persistent questions about how best to frame, illuminate and shoot the action; and hence the repeated – not tragic, but almost comic – failures that we see before us. But Rodríguez – like Sor Juana, perhaps – is condemned, blessed, to fail again, to fail better. This allows us to look beyond Paz and Beaupied's readings of Sor Juana and *Primero sueño*, as failure, or otherwise. This Sisyphean labour lies at the heart of this politically charged, feminist film. Perhaps not uplifting (*pace* Jaffe 2014: 9), but inspiring – a wilful failure, reflecting Jesusa Rodríguez's own career of political activism, pointing to what Halberstam called 'art without markets, drama without script, narrative without progress' (2011: 88).[18]

In conclusion, Pereda casts an important figure within contemporary Mexican feminism to make a film that constantly questions its own nature, making the viewer ask at every turn what it is that we are watching on screen. *Todo* raises the ante on the self-referentiality of Bemberg's film, being not just a film that analyses and references film and films, but a film about its own possibilities of screening a poet and their poetry, indeed of screening anything at all. Pereda also takes Bemberg's distinctive use of chiaroscuro to extremes, fitting given the importance of plays between light and dark to baroque aesthetics generally, and questions of vision to Sor Juana's long poem in particular. Pereda's film, like Bemberg's, is highly intermedial, but the difference is that it constantly undermines itself; if Bemberg uses poetry to advance narrative, at the service of a clear feminist message, Pereda does so to question the very possibility of screening verse, while at the same time hinting at a vital point about failure in Mexican politics. Again, we see another version of that baroque trope *par excellence*, the chiasmus: Bemberg's ostensibly feminist film makes self-reflective points about the nature of art; Pereda's

[18] Mark Fisher (2018: 530) has written critically and quite convincingly against of the ethics of failure as promoted by Halberstam *et al.*, though with principal reference to British politics. In our case, however, we are dealing with a very different context; and while Rodríguez has encountered some political success in recent years, as a Senator in AMLO's government, it would be hard to forget the experience of repeated failures against seemingly immovable obstacles and implacable opponents.

ostensibly self-referential film makes a political, feminist statement. The films illustrate two different, but complementary, ways to 'read' poetry on screen, and demonstrate the rich contribution that poetry can make to film and which film can make to our understanding and enjoyment of poetry.

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