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The Female Body as Spectacle: *Ángel de fuego* and *La mujer del pueblo: Otilia Rauda* by Dana Rotberg

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“Estaba buscando que el público se identificara con cómo un personaje que transgrede leyes— sean las leyes que sean, las de Dios o las de los hombres— inevitablemente va a estar condenado al sacrificio” (Dana Rotberg, interview with Isabel Arredondo, *Palabra de mujer*, 2001).

Mary Russo, in an article on carnival theory, briefly examines the word spectacle as it is applied to women. She recalls her own older, female relatives saying that a certain woman or girl was making a “spectacle out of herself” (318). She explains that this is generally associated with women and it implies an inadvertent loss of boundaries (318). In the case of Dana Rotberg’s films, the protagonists are spectacles in three ways: first, their bodies are different in some way from the women around them; second, their bodies are symbols of their transgressive acts; and third, other characters focus on their differences and transgressive behavior to humiliate or shame them.¹ Others see Alma [Evangelina Sosa, *Ángel de fuego*, 1992] and Otilia [Gabriela Canudas, *La mujer del pueblo: Otilia Rauda*, 2002] as having stepped out of traditional boundaries, thus making spectacles of themselves. This is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s theories on the abject in *Powers of Horror*, where the subject exceeds its corporeal boundaries. This is also a transgression of societal boundaries, as will become clear in the following discussion of Rotberg’s films *Ángel de fuego* and *Otilia Rauda*. While both Alma and Otilia use their bodies as modes of revenge, these films ultimately question whether the two protagonists effectively use their bodies to their own advantage, thus becoming active subjects, or whether they objectify themselves even further.

There are few studies that have focused specifically on Rotberg’s work. In 2001, Isabel Arredondo published *Palabra de Mujer: Historia oral de las directoras de cine mexicanas (1988-1994)*, a collection of interviews with Mexican women film directors.² The chapter on Rotberg includes an introduction to her filmography and an interview with the director on her films previous to *Otilia Rauda*, which premiered after the publication of the book. In this

interview, Rotberg discusses the socio-economic situation of the characters in *Ángel de fuego* and the various perspectives on love in this film. Miriam Haddu dedicates a chapter to Rotberg in *Contemporary Mexican Cinema 1989-1999: History, Space, and Identity* (2007). Haddu examines *Ángel de fuego* as a return to the *arrabal* style and considers the religious symbolism of the characters in this film. Elissa J. Rashkin's studies *Ángel de fuego* as a critique of *salinismo* (during the six-year presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari) in *Women Filmmakers in Mexico: The Country of Which We Dream* (2001). Joanne Hershfield and David R. Maciel examine Rotberg's work in their chapter on women and gender representation in *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Film and Filmmakers* (1999).³ While these critics focus on either the religious symbolism or the socio-economic context in *Ángel de fuego*, they do not provide a sustained analysis of the main character and her transgression of societal boundaries. Furthermore, none of these critics discuss Rotberg's film *Otilia Rauda*. The current study will focus on both films and will compare and contrast the representations of the protagonists' bodies and how they transgress norms and become spectacles.

When compared to other films released by female Mexican directors around the time of *Ángel de fuego*, a difference in socio-economic focus is evident. For example, María Novaro's films focus on middle- or working-class women, with the exception of her first feature-length film *Lola* (1989). However, even in that film, the protagonist lives in Mexico City-proper and comes from a middle-class family. Rotberg's film *Ángel de fuego* takes place on the edges of society—the outskirts of Mexico City—and focuses on the lives of the traveling circus workers and itinerant religious puppeteers whose socio-economic position is much lower than that of most protagonists of Mexican women's films. As Hershfield and Maciel point out, Rotberg's *Ángel de fuego* addresses “women on the fringes of society” (262). Furthermore, Rotberg's films are more disconcerting and challenging of the status quo of film narrative than many of the other women's films released in the nineties and the early part of the new century. In an examination of Latin American film, David William Foster sets out the characteristics of feminist film and affirms that it “must break with the narrative conventions of masculinist discourses” (209).⁴ He goes on to explain how this manifests itself in women's films:

Contar historias de otra manera, resistir abiertamente las expectativas de la novela comercial, mirar el “otro lado” de la materia narrativa, hacer tropos poco imaginativos de fórmulas milenarias, no contar lo que se espera contar y contar lo que no se espera, *escandalizar, perturbar, incomodar*, descentralizar e

invertir esquemas, son todos recursos de una dinámica discursiva de un punto de vista feminista. (209, italics mine)

Throughout this article, it will become clear that Rotberg's films are feminist films under Foster's definition. Initially, the characteristic that most noticeably relates to her films is that they scandalize and make the viewer uncomfortable. For example, in *Ángel de fuego*, Alma has an incestuous relationship with her father and we see them together intimately on screen. In a scene in *Otilia Rauda*, the protagonist walks down a flight of stairs with nothing on but a paper bag over her head. Depending on the viewers' sensibility, these two scenes will have varying effects, but there is still an element of discomfort with each. This is one way of challenging the traditional masculinist film and questioning accepted formulae in stories about women.

Furthermore, Rashkin comments the following on *Ángel de fuego*:

Like experimental literature that searches for a language capable of expressing a physical realm for which existing linguistic codes are inadequate, feminist film has used the medium to resist the conventional objectification of the female body and to centralize that body as subject, while simultaneously embedding it in a time and space that give it broader social implications. (221)

Here, Rashkin identifies an aspect of Rotberg's and other Latin American women directors' films—they address feminist issues while at the same time examining more general socio-economic issues. Rotberg's *Ángel de fuego* is a clear example of this type of film, where feminist discourse is apparent but so is an examination of socio-economic conditions for the protagonist. While other female directors in Mexico were doing this at the time, Rotberg's films focus more on a combined examination of the discourse of the female body as subject or object along with a concerted study of the socio-economic conditions in which that body lives. Therefore, *Ángel de fuego* is not only a reaction to masculinist discourse and male-directed films, but also a reaction to other female directors' films. Rotberg goes further than most other female filmmakers in exposing the audience to uncomfortable situations and in combining feminist and socio-economic discourses.

Alma, the protagonist of *Ángel de fuego*, Rotberg's second feature-length film, is a tightrope walker at the Fantasy Circus on the outskirts of Mexico City—a region depicted realistically by the director. In fact, Rotberg was criticized for creating the squalor in the setting for this film, yet she emphasized that she filmed the area on the outskirts of the

Capital just as it was to show that people lived in such conditions.⁵ Alma has an incestuous relationship with her father and becomes pregnant.⁶ Meanwhile, her mother visits the circus but does not take her away, and later her father dies. In the meantime, she seeks out Josefina [Mercedes Pascual], one of the long-time members of the circus, as a mother figure. Yet the older woman rejects the baby Alma is carrying, as do the others at the circus and she leaves. Ostracized from the only home she has known, she is told that she can work with the other women who supplement the circus's income with prostitution at night. After blowing fire in the streets for money, Alma comes across a traveling evangelical group headed by Refugio [Lilia Aragón], a fundamentalist visionary who writes down the names of the peasants who visit her puppet show in a fabricated book of salvation. Alma travels with the group, taking Refugio as her new mother figure and blindly undergoes Refugio's spiritual cleansing that results in the death of the young girl's unborn child. She returns to tempt Refugio's son, Sacramento [Roberto Sosa], part of the traveling group and a symbol of purity, who ends up committing suicide after having intercourse with her. Alma then returns to the circus where she dresses in her old tightrope clothes, climbs the rope, sits on the swing, and sets fire to the circus tent.

Within the very title of *Ángel de fuego* belies the dichotomy so apparent in Alma, the main character. She is an angel of fire—literally, she dresses like a red angel and walks the tightrope in a circus (Circo Fantasía), uses the same costume when blowing fire in the streets, and then returns to the red leotard at the end of the film, when she climbs the tightrope and sets fire to the circus. Figuratively, Alma is an angel of fire as well—for the majority of this film her features are angelic, she walks and speaks softly, and her face is relaxed. After losing her unborn child, her demeanor changes dramatically from angelic to determined and hard; she walks with more purpose, speaks in a lower register and louder, and the muscles in her face are tense and set. Furthermore, the title is symbolic of the religious allegory that Alma represents as well, punctuated by her very name, meaning "Soul." Hershfield and Maciel also identify this film as allegory: "This film is obviously allegorical in style, theme, and aesthetics. Alma and a number of other female characters represent the eternal suffering of women forced to play the dual role of mother and whore" (262). Other critics, such as Miriam Haddu, also see the film as allegory; Haddu's studies *Ángel de fuego* as religious allegory and includes a lengthy discussion of the characters' symbolic names.

In Rotberg's third feature-length film, *La mujer del pueblo: Otilia Rauda*, Otilia lives with her parents in a small Mexican town and attends a local dance where her father will not allow her to dance with the young men in attendance. He marries her to a military man, Isidro [Álvaro Guerrero], who then cheats on her and infects her with a sexually transmitted disease, leaving her barren. In retaliation, she sleeps with other men from the town and sets up a house for herself in the countryside where she meets Rubén Lazcano [Carlos Torres Torrija] for whom the army, including her husband, is searching. She falls in love with him while she nurses him back to health but he rejects her sedentary life and leaves. Throughout, Melquíades [Alberto Estrella], the son of the family servant, accompanies Otilia, as a childhood friend and protector; he becomes jealous of Rubén and eventually kills him. Otilia discovers this and finds Melquíades killing him before she kills herself.

Otilia is similar to Alma in that her body is central to how others define her and how she projects her inner change to others. In the beginning of this film, Rotberg depicts Otilia as an innocent, young girl protected by her overbearing father. When her father forces her to marry Isidro and she discovers that her new husband has been sleeping with other women and has infected her with a sexually transmitted disease, she leaves him and offers her body to many men from her small town—thus the title “the town’s woman.” As with Alma in *Ángel de fuego*, Otilia’s appearance changes from one of innocence to one of world-weary knowledge and determination. Her clothing, like Alma’s, changes as well; she begins to wear more revealing dresses and in one scene descends the stairs of a party naked and with a bag over her face. This leads to the second way in which Otilia’s body is remarkable in this film—a birthmark covers half of her face so that her body is a dichotomy between beauty and sensuality on the one hand and perceived imperfection on the other.

The first sequence of scenes to be examined from *Ángel de fuego* is the one that takes place when Alma and her father Renato sleep together. The first scene begins with a dark, long shot of Alma waiting outside her father’s trailer, when Josefina [Mercedes Pascual] leaves and glances over; she pauses when she sees Alma, looks at her for a moment and then walks away without saying anything. Alma enters the dark room—the low-key lighting adds to the air of the forbidden—and begins to undress. She glances over her shoulder at Renato, who sits up in bed and watches her sit down beside him. Alma’s gentle, loving movements contrast sharply with the forbidden act being initiated. The viewers only see the two kissing passionately and Renato starting to tug on Alma’s undershirt. Rotberg cuts to a series of

shots outside the trailer of others from the circus and then cuts back to the trailer to show Renato covering Alma with her red tightrope-walking cape. The viewer later confirms that they consummated their relationship in two scenes—one, when Alma takes her dead father's hand and places it on her stomach and two, when Josefina feels Alma's breast and tells her "lo que hicieron fue un pecado muy grande" and "te va a salir malo, un monstruo." Alma tells Josefina she is crazy. Josefina singles Alma out as having sinned and, in effect, made a spectacle of herself. Because Alma is the one carrying the child and her body is the one that will change, as the manager implies, she is the one who is ostracized and shamed for this pregnancy.

In these scenes, three things are evident: first, Alma does not see that she has done anything wrong; second, others see her act as forbidden and transgressing societal norms; and third, Rotberg is exceeding the boundaries of what is comfortable for the audience. As for the first point, Alma's innocence is palpable in the way she acts with her father in the trailer—she does not hesitate while entering and undressing and her caresses are assured and loving, not shameful. Later, when Josefina tells her that she has sinned and will engender a monster, she looks stricken and surprised by the comments and tells Josefina she is crazy. In later scenes, Alma fiercely defends her unborn child and, as seen on the cover of the Latin Cinema Collection DVD, holds one of the traveling troupe's puppets as if it were her baby already born. Her tenderness with the puppet contrasts with the harsh reality of what others think of her condition. In relation to the second point, others judge Alma; Josefina tells her the baby is a monster and the manager of the circus informs her that she will have to earn her keep—as a prostitute—or leave, because he is not in the business of supporting babies. When Alma encounters the traveling puppeteers, she meets their leader, Refugio, a religious zealot who tells the people at her shows that she has the book of forgiveness in her possession. The spectators of the puppet show, inhabitants from rural areas surrounding Mexico City, line up to sign their names in her book. When Alma waits in line to put her name in the book of forgiveness, Refugio tells her that she cannot, that she is not forgiven. Thus begins Alma's odyssey to seek forgiveness for her unborn child even though she does not see herself as having sinned.

As for the third point (that Rotberg challenges the audience's comfort level), we see Alma being intimate with her father and then later pregnant with his child. While incest is more common in Latin American films than, for example, Hollywood cinema, this scene is

particularly explicit because the act contrasts sharply with Alma's innocence. Furthermore, the representation of incest on screen is uncomfortable for the audience, particularly when the images are so conspicuous. The reason for this challenge to the audience is evident in Foster's comment that a feminist director is one that seeks to "escandalizar, perturbar, incomodar." Thus, Rotberg inverts the natural order in *Ángel de fuego* to destabilize the traditional masculinist narrative—including the traditional love-story and rite-of-passage narratives. Traditional narratives do not take into consideration the existence of a young girl such as Alma living in a circus trailer on the outskirts of Mexico City where she must find comfort and tenderness wherever she can. Neither do they consider Renato's situation; as Sophia McClennen observes: "*Ángel de fuego* is a dystopic film that suggests that both men and women are brutally and tragically trapped by the limits of society" (82). Rashkin, while discussing the circus space, comments:

As in other heterotopic situations, alliances are formed out of necessity that do not always correspond to what the dominant culture considers normal. It is the liminal, marginal status of the circus that, perhaps paradoxically, permits behavior that could be described as more free, such as the unremarked-upon gay relationship between the magician Lidio and the ringmaster/circus manager Rito, as well as Alma and Renato's incestuous relationship. (208-209)

In addition, in an interview with Isabel Arredondo, Rotberg responds to the question of love in this film:

Uno está acostumbrado a leer—por lo menos en el cine, que indudablemente es un discurso ideológico—amores muy maniqueos, muy establecidos, muy funcionales, muy legibles. . . . En el cine en esas escenas eróticas sólo falta que los angelitos te papaloteen encima. Bueno, eso sucede, yo no lo niego, pero suceden muchísimas otras cosas también que en el cine no existen. . . . Hay una infinita gama de posibilidades amorosas; no todas ellas sanas, no todas ellas aprobables, pero existen. Nos gusten o no nos gusten, las condenemos o no, existen, están y funcionan. (186)

Therefore, not only is Rotberg challenging the filmic status quo; she is also representing that which exists in real life, even though it is not depicted in many films. She is questioning the need to judge others, as many of the characters do with Alma.

Ángel de fuego is a very bleak vision of the life of a young girl on the outskirts of Mexico City. The severity of the circumstances prompted criticism of the film as too pessimistic and of the set as staged, to which Rotberg responded: "the worst thing is, it's not all in my imagination. It's what is really there. . . . The movie, in set design terms, doesn't

have any work to it. All is done on real time, and we filmed everything as it is” (Rashkin 205). Earlier in the same chapter, Rashkin contrasts *Ángel de fuego* with Rotberg’s first feature-length film *Intimidación*:

Ángel de fuego, on the other hand, was a highly personal vision of the urban squalor in which, in a period of alleged economic recovery and prosperity, millions of Mexicans found themselves living. Although emerging from the context of the national film renaissance of the early 1990s, it can be seen to an extent as a recuperation of the same aspects of the politically and formally confrontational Latin American cinema of the 1960s. (193)⁷

While films such as María Novaro’s *Danzón* (1991) were celebrated as national products to be consumed internationally, *Ángel de fuego* was criticized within Mexico for its pessimistic view of the country. Rotberg’s film, in contrast with films such as Novaro’s in the 1990s, challenges the idea of economic prosperity and focuses on those classes that never benefited from the economic growth of that time period in a vein similar to the films of “Cinema Novo” of the 1960s. McClennen asserts that this film “turns its critique on social institutions, like religious faith, the family, prostitution, child labor and the class system, in order to suggest that men and women born into the lower classes of Mexican society face insurmountable obstacles to freedom” (83).

Miriam Haddu identifies *Ángel de fuego* as an extension of the genre of the *arrabal*:

in a manner that extends previous representations to include an examination of the social, theological, and emotional conditioning of those living on the margins of society. Her examination incorporates a representation of the *arrabal* that whilst in dialogue with Buñuel’s *Los olvidados*, engages in other discourses that extend to incorporate notions of the body, representations of the body, and the body as textual material. . . . Through Alma’s perspective viewers are taken on a journey through the *arrabal* where the marginalized are being left behind by progress. And it is through Alma’s eyes that viewers are provided with a vision of the *arrabal* as a space of possibilities; an illusion which is then tragically shattered towards the end of the film. (143)

As Haddu contends, *Ángel de fuego* represents more than a play on the *arrabal* genre. In fact, it is also a comment on the socio-economic position of its characters and their marginalized space within Mexico. Haddu recognizes the possibility of hope in this film but also describes how it is not a legitimate hope, not a way out for the main character. For her part, Rashkin sees the circus as a space of subaltern possibilities in the era of *salinismo*.⁸ As with Haddu, Rashkin identifies the characters in this film as those left behind by Mexico’s progress. Of

course, a small portion of Mexico's population did enjoy the benefits of this progress, which is one of the main arguments of Rotberg's film and Rashkin's critique.

The sequence in Renato's trailer, discussed above, begins with a shot of Alma waiting outside, leaning up against the trailer. It is nighttime; the lighting is dark except for the light coming from the windows and top of the trailer. All that is highlighted is the side of Alma's white dress, which contrasts with the red, feathered tightrope-walking shawl she has folded over her arm. We see Josefina in the light from inside the trailer yet each character is in semi-darkness. Alma enters and shuts the door—Rotberg holds the shot on the trailer with the closed door for a moment before switching to the interior, emphasizing the significance of what is about to happen there. Again, the scene is dark and we only see Alma's midsection from the back in the reflection of light and her shadow on the wall as she undresses. When she turns around to face Renato in the bed, we only see half of her face as the other half is hidden in shadow. During the shot of Alma undressing, the camera height is lower than eye level, suggesting the perspective of Renato from the bed. When we see the two characters together sitting in the bed, they are both equally in the frame and neither is given preference in terms of perspective. They are at the same height, which implies that neither character is dominating the situation. At this point, the words to the background music are clearer: "sin un amor, el alma muere, derrotada." Doubly noteworthy, first, the words refer to the soul—Alma's name—and second, they refer to the soul's death without love. As mentioned above, a traditional narrative love story would not place a father and daughter in this position, but Rotberg's film is counter to the traditional narrative in the exploration of where a young girl such as Alma might find love and tenderness. When the camera cuts to the next shot, we hear that the music was coming from somewhere outside the trailer, most likely from the circus tent. Again, as with the shot of the trailer with the closed door, Rotberg holds the camera on the picnic table outside the trailer near the tent as we hear more of the song, signifying that what was started in the trailer continues as the song goes on. Much of this sequence is in the dark and corresponds with the forbidden nature of the incestuous act between Alma and Renato. In contrast, the scene where Josefina realizes that Alma is pregnant is in the light of day. We see the older woman feeling Alma's breast in full light and Alma's expression of concern but not shame is evident. The camera alternates over-the-shoulder shots, first focusing on Alma and then on Josefina's eyes as they rise to meet Alma's in an expression of comprehension. The camera is at eye level throughout this scene

and shifts from alternate over-the-shoulder scenes to shots that focus fully on each character as they talk. This directs the viewer's attention to what is being said in this conversation about the sin that has been committed and Alma's rejection of this conclusion as well as the idea that her baby might be a monster.

The second sequence of scenes to be examined from *Ángel de fuego* takes place when Alma returns to see Sacramento after she has lost her baby due to Refugio's sacrificial purification that left the protagonist without food and water for too long. She slowly and quietly enters the workshop and walks directly to Sacramento who is mortifying himself with *nopales* tied tightly to his back to the point where we can see blood streaming down his back.⁹ In this scene, it is evident that Alma is the dominant figure both in the narrative and on screen—the camera follows each of her movements and for the majority of the first part, she is the only figure on screen and the only character speaking. Sacramento goes down on his knees and Alma remains standing; the camera follows Sacramento's movement down, thus placing us at his perspective and giving dominance to Alma. Alma then lowers herself to Sacramento's level and they embrace and kiss. This entire scene has taken place in the well-lit workshop as opposed to Renato's dark trailer. Rotberg cuts to a shot of the young Noé [Noé Montealegre] looking through the workshop door as sounds from the street filter in. The next scene is of Alma and Sacramento naked; she is lying on the floor looking away as Sacramento caresses her body obsessively. This is a panning shot taken from low on the ground and it captures their bodies from their low perspective. After they dress, Alma turns to leave and says: "Matar a un ángel es pecado y tu dios no perdona a los que pecan." This solidifies the theme of revenge that has developed in the film. The camera captures Alma leaving the front door from Noé's level, showing the bottom half of her body. The camera then cuts to her face as she looks down and answers: "A poco de veras creías que Sacramento nació limpio." The final shot in the sequence is of Alma walking past Refugio with a defiant smile on her face. After this, Refugio rushes in to find that Sacramento has committed suicide. We then see the evidence of Alma's revenge.

Alma's transformation from the beginning of this film to the end is palpable—she begins as an innocent, wide-eyed young girl and ends as a mature, calculating young woman. In contrast to the other women at the circus in the beginning of *Ángel de fuego*, Alma has an innocent appearance—her facial features are very soft, her eyes are large, her movements are slow and almost timid. As seen in the shots with Renato in the trailer, a soft light generally

surrounds her. In contrast, after losing her baby her appearance is one of maturity and bitterness—her facial muscles are tenser, her voice is lower, she walks with more assurance, and she has an accusing look in her eyes. Furthermore, in the later scenes, Alma generally appears in a harsher light than at the beginning of the film. As Rotberg explains in an interview:

La historia de Alma es la historia del sacrificio de los inocentes. Todo lo que ella ha vivido—el incesto, el tratar de preservar a su hijo abandonando el circo, el involucrarse con esta *troupe* de religiosos—son siempre actos inocentes, absolutamente infantiles. Incluso en la relación con su padre hay una condición amorosa; le otorga a su cuerpo la condición de expresarse amorosamente. No hay violencia física, no hay violencia amorosa, hay una violencia conceptual, porque es un incesto. Alma es inocente hasta que, con la seducción a Sacramento, se venga. (Arredondo 185)

This transformation highlights the changes within Alma herself; she has been betrayed or corrupted by the adults around her and has a need for revenge. Others made her into a spectacle—as a tightrope walker, fire-breather, pregnant young girl, and a martyr for Refugio’s religion. In a sense, the last scene when Alma walks the tightrope, sits on the swing, and sets fire to the circus is a last act of independence and control over her own destiny and body. On the other hand, it might also be a comment on the ultimate hopelessness of Alma’s situation.

The first scenes of *Otilia Randa*, Rotberg’s third feature-length film, show the protagonist Otilia as a playful young woman who cannot help dancing while her mother and their maid fit her dress for the upcoming town festival. The first image is of the back of Otilia’s head and then she slowly turns around; we immediately see two things: she is smiling and she has a birthmark that covers half of her face. In these early scenes, we see none of the self-consciousness that will plague Otilia after the festival dance—she even stops on her way out of the room to throw a satisfying glance toward the dresser mirror. When she has the final fitting for her dress, she swirls around the room in front of the same mirror as her mother and the maid look on approvingly. The first sign of trouble comes when she meets her father while leaving the house and he says harshly “Tápenla” and the smile disappears from her face. Even arriving to the dance she cannot seem to help but smile. Throughout these scenes with the dress, Otilia keeps a lock of hair over her face where her mother placed it to cover the mark. It is actually not her face that makes the boy happily dancing with her take her back to the bench; her father watches on and glares at the couple until the

boy notices. He nervously leads her back to the maid and leaves. We later learn that the other young people have been making fun of Otilia; her father asks one of the young men and he says that someone had said “Otilia usa rellenos en el cuerpo para disimularse lo fea y que usted no deja que la toquen para que no se descubra.” The father insists on knowing what this particular young man said to Otilia and he confesses “Yo le dije que no, porque Otilia tiene las tetas tan grandes porque la calentura se las infla.” Thus, we see that Otilia’s body is an issue for everyone—her mother, father, and the other young people in her town—but she herself paradoxically still seems carefree about it at the beginning of the film.

Throughout this sequence, the wardrobe is especially important, considering the number of times other people cover Otilia’s body. First, her mother covers her face with her hair to hide her birthmark; then her father tells the other women to cover her, implying that the top of her dress is too revealing. Then, the maid covers her with the shawl when she returns to the bench after dancing with the young man who was scared of her father. In addition, the lighting adds to the mood of these scenes. For example, when Otilia is with her mother and the maid upstairs in the room fitting the material for the dress and then later when Otilia dances in front of the mirror, the lighting is bright, denoting that there is nothing to hide. However, when Otilia descends the stairs to greet her father before the dance and he tells the other women to cover her up, the lighting is dark, as if Otilia needed to be hidden. On the way to the dance, it is nighttime and Otilia is in shadows, further adding to the feeling of suppression. While it is evident that Otilia’s father wants to protect his daughter from the ridicule of the other young people at the dance, he also cannot tolerate to see her enjoying herself, dancing with a young man. The low lighting contributes to her father’s oppressive attitude.

The second sequence to be examined from *Otilia Rauda* occurs later in the film, after Otilia has been forced to marry Isidro, a military man her father chooses who renders her barren because of a disease he contracts from another woman. The irony of the situation is not lost on Otilia, who realizes that her father, by forcing her into this marriage, is partially to blame for her inability to have children after having been so strict about her contact with men. Essentially, Otilia becomes “the woman of the town” as the second part of the title implies; she offers herself to other men in town and visits a prostitute, Chenda [Martha Papadimitriou], for advice. The other woman gives her a red dress, which she refuses at first but then agrees to wear to Chenda’s upcoming birthday party. Directly before the party,

Otilia's husband pretends to have a gift for her, which turns out to be a basket with two eyeholes. He then repeats Chenda's earlier words: "Tú, solamente tapándote la carota con ese tenate, serías la mujer más bella del mundo." This line foreshadows a scene in the following sequence at Chenda's party. Rotberg's links this scene and sequence to the next with an opening image of Chenda looking at Otilia's husband, drunk and bitterly laughing. Next, Chenda accuses Otilia of monopolizing her male guests and Otilia leaves the room, seductively walking up the central staircase while all the men in the room turn to watch her. While one of the guests is singing, we hear a plate crash to the floor and all eyes turn to the staircase, where we see Otilia descending the stairs wearing nothing but high heels and the basket her husband gave her. The lighting is lower than when she ascended the staircase, but as she reaches the bottom flight her body is highlighted. She walks very slowly down the stairs, accentuating her voluptuous and well-proportioned body. She walks into the room among the guests and leans her arm against a supporting column. Rotberg holds the camera on Otilia's body for several seconds. The only sound heard is Otilia's heels on the floor during the descent and crossing of the room.

In the scene analyzed above, the following four elements are evident: first, Otilia's body is different from those of the other female characters; second, others try to punish her because of her difference; third, Otilia transgresses societal boundaries by becoming a prostitute and by descending the staircase naked; and fourth, Rotberg intentionally makes the viewer slightly uncomfortable by holding the camera on Otilia as she slowly descends the staircase and by focusing on her body as she leans against the column for several seconds. As discussed previously, Otilia's body is different in two ways: first, she has a birthmark that covers much of her face. Because of this, her family is over-protective, other young people ostracize her, and she becomes self-conscious; and, second, her body is voluptuous and contrasts with the perceived imperfection of her face. Ironically, others punish Otilia because of her curvy body—her mother tries to cover her curves at the beginning of the film and her father is menacing in his over-protection of his daughter and also insists she remain covered up, with the shawl for example. Later, other women punish Otilia for her beauty because of their jealousy and her husband punishes her because he cannot possess her body, as she shares it with other men. Thus, Otilia transgresses societal boundaries by becoming a prostitute and sharing her body with many different men, not just her husband. She also transgresses boundaries by appearing naked at the party; not only does she appear naked but

she also forces all those in the room to look at her body as she slowly descends the staircase. Finally, Rotberg herself uses these scenes—Otilia’s parents covering her with the dress and shawl, her father isolating her from other young people, her physical encounters with her husband and later other men, and her descent down the staircase naked—as an illustration of her trajectory from obedient object to active subject and owner of her own body. Rotberg films the scenes of Otilia enjoying sexual relations with men or entering the party naked with an eye for rebellion; both character and director are rebelling against societal norms that indicate that a woman must not enjoy sex or that she should not expose her body to others. It is noteworthy that it is only after Otilia begins to sleep with other men in town that the film depicts her as taking pleasure in sex; the first sexual scene of her with another man differs greatly from the first sexual encounter with Isidro, where it is apparent that she is in pain and suffering. Discussing the figure of the prostitute in Mexican fiction, Debra A. Castillo comments: “The loose woman poses a particular threat to society if she has sex for pleasure because she thus violates both of the stereotypical categories for women: that of the decent woman indifferent to sex and that of the prostitute who accepts money for an unpleasant service” (7). Hence, Otilia defies convention twofold: she has sex with men other than her husband and she enjoys it. Otilia makes a spectacle of herself by exposing her body to other men sexually and by exposing it literally to the guests at the party. In this way, she attempts to assert ownership over her body by being the author of her own spectacle.

In her analysis of Federico Gamboa’s novel *Santa*, Margo Glantz compares Santa’s body to that of an animal sold in the market. According to Glantz, when Santa arrives to Mexico City and becomes a prostitute, the author offers the protagonist’s body up, piece by piece, to the readers and the novel itself “oculta en el cuerpo de su relato el cuerpo de Santa, o mejor dicho, lo escamotea y lo fragmenta” (43). Thus, just as the meat shop close by the brothel sells the beef in parts, Gamboa strings out his description of Santa and offers her to the reader in parts: “Santa no es mujer, es un cuerpo destazado” (45). In a way, Otilia’s body in Rotberg’s film is also fragmented—while her parents wish to hide her curves, her husband suggests that she hide her face. She herself fragments her body by descending the staircase with the basket over her head. Moreover, others see Otilia in a disjointed way because they see the flaw on her face as inconsistent with the beauty of her body. All of this fragmentation serves to create more of a spectacle around Otilia’s body; her body is served up to those around her and the viewer in parts by her parents, her husband, and, eventually,

herself. However, in contrast to Gamboa, Rotberg presents Otilia's naked body as a whole, most conspicuously, in the scene where she descends the staircase. Unlike Santa, Otilia is in control of her body in this scene; she has decided to expose herself to everyone at the party. On the other hand, she is still fragmented because of her husband's basket covering her face.¹⁰

As with Alma, Otilia undergoes a psychological transformation in this film that manifests itself physically. In the beginning of *Otilia Rauda*, the protagonist appears youthful and innocent with soft facial features and a higher register of voice, similar to Alma to *Ángel de fuego*. We see this in the opening scenes when Otilia is with her mother and servant preparing for the dance and sizing her dress—she smiles and the muscles in her face are relaxed. When she walks to the mirror to look at herself she almost floats. Later, at the dance, she sits expectantly on the side of the dance floor and even when her father scares away one boy and forces her cousin to dance with her, she softly tells him they should just go home. Like Alma before the loss of her baby, Otilia exudes an air of innocence. However, Otilia also experiences a maternal loss; in her case, she is unable to bear children because her husband gives her a sexually transmitted disease. Ironically, her father forced her to marry Isidro even though he knew of his reputation with women. In the scene where Otilia confronts her parents about her husband and the impossibility of her father's name continuing, as there will be no heirs, Otilia's features have hardened just as Alma's harden when she confronts Sacramento in *Ángel de fuego*. She walks more purposefully, her steps resonating more on the floor. Her voice is lower, her facial features are not as soft, and the muscles in her face are harder; all of which give her a look of experience and worldliness. The scene in which she confronts her parents takes place in their house at night; Otilia walks in the door and the room is filled with shadows. The entire time she is speaking, her mouth is in a tight line and there is little change in intonation as she speaks. She confronts her father for the first time and then informs them that they will never see her again. This is the last scene in which Otilia dresses in the modest way her parents demanded, with a sweater covering her shoulders. In the scene immediately following this one, she is at her house in a nightgown, drunk and waiting for Isidro. From then on, her appearance and demeanor are confrontational and assured. The scene ends with her telling Isidro: “Si me vuelves a tocar, un día de éstos amaneces muerto.”

Both Otilia and Alma experience abuse from others who punish them for their differences. Moreover, both protagonists use their bodies to exact revenge on their abusers—Otilia denies her body to her husband while offering it to other men and literally bearing it to all the guests at the party. Alma, in turn, seduces Sacramento, whose mother had been fashioning him as a pure gift to God. Both protagonists also attempt to turn to their advantage the ways that others make spectacles of them. However, Rotberg ultimately offers no hope for these characters, both of which die at the end of their respective films. More specifically, both women commit suicide, thus placing into question the idea that they effectively use their bodies to their own advantage: “The control that economic and theological forces exert over Alma’s [and Otilia’s bodies] lead inexorably to death and annihilation” (Rashkin 212). Admittedly, Alma successfully avenges herself against Refugio and Otilia exacts revenge against her husband. However, this revenge never brings back Alma’s lost unborn child or Otilia’s ability to have children. As Susan Bordo has claimed, “The pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested” (99). Thus, Alma and Otilia attempt to use their bodies, the instrument of others’ oppression toward them, to their own benefit; however, in so doing, they in fact punish themselves. Moreover, because of their social transgressions, Alma and Otilia are isolated from the society they have known and they are each forced to sacrifice something they truly want and, ultimately, they sacrifice themselves.

Notes

¹ Rotberg (1960, Mexico City) has directed the following feature-length films: *Intimidad* (1989), *Ángel de fuego* (1992), and *La mujer del pueblo: Otilia Rauda* (2002). She has also directed the documentary *Elvira Luz Cruz, pena máxima* (1985). *Ángel de fuego* won the following awards: DICINE Award and FIPRESCI Prize at the Guadalajara Film Festival (1992). *Otilia Rauda* won the NHK Award at Sundance (2000) and the Golden Unicorn at the Amiens International Film Festival (2001). *Elvira Luz Cruz* won the Silver Ariel for Best Short Documentary at the Ariel Awards in Mexico (1986).

² Although not included here, Isabel Arredondo discusses teaching Rotberg's films in "Motherhood, Desire, and Intimacy: Teaching Mexican Women's Films."

³ Rotberg's *Intimidad* [Intimacy] is mentioned briefly in Diana Robin and Ira Jaffe's introduction to the number of the journal *Frontiers* entitled "Women Filmmakers and the Politics of Gender in Third Cinema": "Most recently, filmmakers Marise Sistach (*I Know Three of Them*), Dana Rotberg (*Intimacy*, 1989), and María Novaro (*Lola*, 1989, *Danzón*, 1992) have made films that center on problems of sexuality, motherhood, work, and recreation in contemporary women's lives" (3). Dennis West mentions Rotberg's *Otilia Rauda* in the section "News of Iberoamérica" in his discussion of the Festival de Cine Iberoamericano [Iberoamerican Film Festival]. West relates that Gabriela Canudas won best actress for her performance in this film and he also explains that the film is based on Sergio Galindo's novel of the same name.

⁴ Translation mine.

⁵ Rashkin, *Women Filmmakers in Mexico*, 205.

⁶ See Julia Kristeva's discussion of maternal desire and incest from *Desire in Language* (1980).

⁷ See Michael Martin's volumes on New Latin American Cinema.

⁸ Also see Carl J. Mora's *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-2004* for further discussion of *salinismo*.

⁹ In one scene in this film we also see Refugio carving letters and shapes into Sacramento's back as Refugio explains that Sacramento will be thankful later as she was to her father for doing the same to her. Thus, there is a cycle of abuse and self-abuse passed on from parent to child.

¹⁰ To carry this comparison even further, the blind piano player in Gamboa's novel marries Santa in the end and "saves" her from the consequences of her fallen life as a prostitute. Similarly, Otilia's companion Melquíades follows the protagonist in her move to the countryside and it is obvious that he would like to marry Otilia and "save" her from her life up to that point.

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