

# Medeas. Interview with María Ruido

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Palma Lombardo

## ABSTRACT

Interview with the researcher and director María Ruido, posed a tour of the filmmakers who have marked her career. The mythological figure of Medea stands as spokeswoman of an imaginary's lights and shadows built by women before the camera. Exposed, brave and contradictory women.

## KEYWORDS

Akerman, selfportrait, cinema, Carri, Duras, feminism, Kawase, maternity, mythology, women, subjectivity.

María Ruido defines herself as a visual artist, researcher and cultural producer. The images and bodies leak from her work, brave and resistant, survivors of a story that threatens to banish them from what is visible. The banishment is worth mentioning when María tells me that her latest work is closely linked to the mythical figure of Medea, a roaming woman by imposition. A complex and revolutionary character that contrasts with the more traditional notion of femininity and, especially, with the concept of motherhood.

‘Medea is a “bad mother”, one that doesn’t do what is expected of her,’ she says. And that is her starting point, her darkness and at the same time her strength. Like the filmmakers that have inspired her, María Ruido searches in her personal experience the way to bring to light a hidden reflex, something that persists as a long shadow despite our efforts to ignore it. Here Medea is interesting not only for opening the wounds of mother-daughter relationships but also because her character shows a woman that defies her destiny in the world.

‘Many cinematic versions punish Medea for the crime she committed against her own progeny, starting with Pasolini’s adaptation. However, in Euripides’s version, Medea escapes on a carriage driven by winged horses. After all, she is a feared and powerful sorceress, direct descendant of Circe and the Sun. The chorus of Euripides’s play is a very interesting song to the unfair condition of women.’ María thinks that later interpretations of the play have insisted on linking her children’s murder with the spite that her husband’s abandonment, Jason, has provoked in her. Nonetheless, there are more interesting theories that see in Medea’s act an outburst of cruel and conscious rebellion in light of the impossibility of accessing the position of power that Jason had promised her. It is the vengeance of a woman who knows she is capable of exercising authority, an authority that is denied to her precisely because of her feminine condition. I tell María that Medea is without a doubt a controversial character, as it is not easy to think about a maternity that does not revolve around unconditional dedication but that is based on the manipulation and exploitation of these affections to culminate her macabre intentions. Even so, personal experiences often invite us to confront images of the world that are far from the ideal of representation. ‘To work from subjectivity is a key element, and the relationships with parents are an example of something that can enormously mark your life. And the trauma of these experiences, or even the absence of these figures (maternal and/or paternal), can draw the course of the stories. That is precisely the reason why I have been inspired by women that, with a very tough and complex baggage, have had the courage to speak about it.’

We mention absences and I think of Kawase and her obsessive search for her father. Of those hands that try to touch the images, to cling to them as if they were the only testimony able to safeguard a piece of the universe that belongs to us. When there is no lineage with which to root our position in the world, maybe the images offer a refuge to link us with what resists taking form. María confesses her fixation with these ghosts: ‘I am obsessed with people that disappear. In *The Inner Memory* (*La memoria interior*, 2000) I had the hope of finding the answer in the images, laying on the table my parents’ abandonment. But no matter how much you stir up old memories, the pain and the obsessions remain. In the beginning it seems that everything is fine, but then you realize that they were actually still present, that they were swept under the rug. All of a sudden everything explodes and you have family scenes that almost remind me of *The Celebration* (*Festen*, 1998) by Thomas Vinterberg. Not in the origin of the trauma, of course, but in that appearance of calmness, of festivity, which hides a storm. I think it is important to deal with the trauma, to know it is there. For me, images have been helpful for personal research, but also to feel questioned by a screen that talks to me from subjectivity. And to talk from subjectivity allows you to see that it is very probable that what happened to you also happened to someone else. To have courage from that family pain. Filmmakers such as Marguerite Duras, for example, are interesting to me not so much because they offer answers but because of their capacity of exposing themselves in a visceral way. She tells everything in a very brutal way, she is able to express what you could only tell yourself silently in the privacy of your home. She can speak to you from the most absolute desire, show you the type of person that you don’t want to be, but that deep down you know you are.’

Almost in unison we mention *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). In a woman’s confessions to her Japanese lover, the taboo of the flesh is again revealed, what should stay hidden in the dampness of an attic. ‘The main character cannot resist that urge. She knows that the man she loves is German, the enemy, and that the others will see it as an act of treason; she knows she will be humiliated, that they will cut her hair, but she cannot –she does not want to– live a different way. She resists until she goes mad, and that is of remarkable courage. It is curious, because as a person I would probably not want to meet someone like Duras. She was extremely unstable, she had a sickening obsession with men, problems with alcohol... but one can still say that she openly embraced all of her contradictions. Her works have the ability to really stir you deeply, until you vomit. And you don’t always put so much subjectivity in your work, something that personal. Without a doubt, she was a great artist locked in a horrible personality.’

With these words, it seems that Medea's aura soars over our heads again. The power of these filmmakers resides in canalizing their personal difficulties to transform the image into a scream. Sometimes from pain, sometimes from protest. 'Duras's relationship with her mother reminds me of the one I have with my own mother. They were victims of their time in which their only option was to reproduce and raise their progeny. Women that, if presented with the opportunity, may not have chosen to be mothers. In some way, we –their sons and daughters– were a burden that they had no right to give up. And in that tough context, you have to become something like an insect. Put armor on and carry on. In Duras, for example, many of her novels are about the life conditions in the colonies and the putrefaction that affects family relationships. On some occasion, Duras even suggests that her mother hates her.' It is a painful confession, but one that fits perfectly with the gazes that we are trying to comprehend. Cinema can delve into the surface of calm reality, presents us with characters so monstrous that they are similar to us.

'In that sense, I have to admit that I did not like Chantal Akerman's last film (*No Home Movie*, 2015). I couldn't tell you exactly why, but there is something that seems distant to the story it wants to tell, even artificial. I usually like her fictions or documentaries more than when she talks about herself. There is something that disturbs me when she explains herself. Of her last film I am suspicious precisely of that too pacific relationship with her mother. I don't know Akerman's situation before committing suicide too well, but I have the feeling that she knew that this was the film she was leaving as testament and that is why I find it strange that she wanted to avoid any conflict in it. It's as if she wanted to embellish the frictions, to fill the rifts with a camera that doesn't seem to find its place in the space. There are very dubious shots. And Akerman wasn't exactly a person without personal problems. In her self-portraits we perceive a very closed person, between her and her thoughts there is a kind of wall. In fact, it's curious that in her self-portraits we see an abundance of closed rooms and hermetic spaces.'

It seems inevitable that María's words take us to *La chambre* (1972), one of Chantal Akerman's first films. There we see the filmmaker, lying in bed, until the movement of the camera eliminates the body from the framing to focus on the details that make up the small world of her bedroom. A certain circular order is produced, infinite, close to the suffocation of the space. I tell María that maybe Akerman wanted to remain unnoticed; the self-portrait isn't an easy genre. To expose your skin before the cinematic device, as we were saying regarding Duras, is many times a matter of courage. Of knowing that the

camera will pierce our heart. Maybe in that kind of Akerman's "shyness", in that act of protecting oneself behind a wall of apparent coldness, we are seeing a seed of what later on will be the main character of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

'*Jeanne Dielman* really impressed me when I saw it, it's a very interesting film. Akerman filmed it with a very firm hand, with really premeditated fixed shots. Very different from the type of images that she offers in *No Home Movie*. While in the later Akerman there is a kind of abandonment or neglect, in *Jeanne Dielman* it is quite the contrary; the control of the image is absolute.' I then ask María if she thinks that Delphine Seyrig's acting corresponds to that distant personality that she sees in Akerman when she treats personal elements, or even if we can glimpse any autobiographic elements.

'To be honest I don't think so. I think Seyrig's style is more in line with the acting model of French cinema in the 70s; that containment in acting, that evident distance with the character, marking the limits of representation. More than an autobiographic film, I think it's a militant film, with a clear feminist message. I am especially fascinated by the way that the film treats time. I am more and more convinced that what we need in films to say things is time, and Akerman manages that flawlessly. We have to watch Seyrig peeling potatoes over and over again, in a totally mechanical way, until one day, simply by buttoning her jacket wrongly, the closed and routine world she knew falls apart. In the end what's important is not the ending, the scene of the murder, but the expansion of the whole process to get there.'

We agree on the fact that *Jeanne Dielman* is an overwhelming story, and without a doubt the constant flux that is given to time in each scene turns it into a film of slow enjoyment. It is not easy to get carried away by that low intensity current, by that residue that settles in until it festers and explodes in a heartbreaking final scene. Once you get there, you understand that it could not be told in a different way. This thought inevitably brings us to debate about how times have changed in contemporary fiction, or how to incorporate the new communication devices in it.

'Resuming Akerman's thread about her last film, there is a scene in which she has a Skype conversation with her mother. It's curious how it ends up being a quite empty exchange of words, very significant of that type of communication. That kind of "No, you hang up..." that keeps on going over and over again. I felt like screaming at the screen. There is nothing I find colder or more heartbreaking than a Skype conversation. But at the

same time I think it's something that cinema has to learn to add from now on, it needs to find a way to represent it, because they are mechanisms that we are getting used to in our daily lives at a frenetic pace. They are tools that are changing the way we use words, they interpose a screen in our relationship with others. But it isn't easy to introduce the aesthetics of new technology in the cinematic language and make it seem organic. I'm still trying.'

In fact, new technology is also modifying the perception of oneself, the meaning of the self-portrait. We both agree on the fact that the selfie is a terrifying concept. We think of it as the narcissistic reverse of that depth that we perceived in the images of subjectivity.

'Art history is full of portraits that don't say anything, and the selfie could be one of its most dangerous manifestations, in the sense that we are obliged to overexpose ourselves without saying anything about us. I think of Warhol's portraits, where the human face is completely inscrutable, empty, there is nothing behind it. It proves that a face can lack content. Warhol's portraits talk about other things: of the commercialization of images, of their circulation in wealth, but they are not talking about the person you have in front of you. Besides, he also didn't position himself at all. Very few people knew the character that was behind Andy Warhol.'

I ask María if perhaps, in the selfie era, it is worth it to reclaim a self-portrait unconnected to self-worship

'Well, now that you say it, I don't know if you know *The blonds* (*Los rubios*, 2003), a film by Albertina Carri that talks about something so painful and personal such as the disappearance of her parents due to the Argentinian dictatorship. But she does

it through memory, from what little she remembers of them from when she was a little girl. Instead of acting as herself, she decides to build an alter ego in the actress Analía Couceyro. An actress that not only looks like her but also has a very peculiar personality, a very personal acting style. She portrays herself through the fragmentation of memory, reproduces the dark moments with scenes played by Playmobil toys... I think it's a very interesting way of talking about oneself without the need to stand before a camera.'

While I finish writing this interview, and in the curiosity that drives me to type the name of Analía Couceyro in Google, I find that years ago she participated in one of the many interpretations of Medea's play on stage. The coincidence of this discovery practically turns into the final confirmation of the fact that Medea's aura still wandered through the silences and pauses of our conversation. In the end, all her fury, so terrible and yet so liberating, so similar to ourselves that we would almost not want to accept it, again makes an appearance as a hurricane. Curiously, one of our last word exchanges revolves around the capacity of the myth to tell the stories that we dare not confess.

'The myth can achieve that we share collectively a difficult to assume truth. That we dare discuss it. The myth can be a channel of empowerment, as it turns some of our most personal and painful issues into universal matters.' •

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Palma Lombardo (Huesca, 1991) is a graduate in Fine Arts from the Universitat de Barcelona and Master in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual by Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Her action framework includes audiovisual production and processes of

experimentation and cinematographic research. She has worked in museums as coordinator of activities, and collaborates with different projects dedicated to cultural management.