

“I WAS NEVER AFRAID,” AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCRECIA MARTEL

Gerd Gemünden and Silvia Spitta

Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* (2017), set on the outer colonial frontiers of the Spanish Empire during the last decade of the eighteenth century, pushes traditional notions of a colonial adventure tale to its parodic limits. Based on Argentine writer Antonio Di Benedetto's 1956 novel of the same title, the film follows the plight of Don Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a Creole (defined as a Spaniard born in the Americas and, therefore, considered a second-class citizen) magistrate in the service of the Spanish crown. Resentful of his demotion to the provinces, he yearns for a transfer to the city of Lerma, where his wife and family live, and where he hopes to escape the deadening routine of his assignment.

Unable to set any plot in motion, other than that of his own destruction, *Zama*'s actions seem erratic and incomprehensible. In the first scene, he violently strikes a native woman who catches him abjectly spying on her while taking a mud bath; next, he detachedly oversees the torture of a prisoner. As the audience slowly realizes, *Zama*'s frustration is the result of his repeatedly denied desires: sexual, monetary, and political. As time passes, one governor succeeds another, yet *Zama* becomes ever more destitute and miserable. In order to gain the favor of his superiors, he finally volunteers for a mission to hunt down a dangerous criminal. This foray will lead him deep into native territory, where his sense of displacement and personal undoing only escalate.

Martel's status as one of the most creative and audacious contemporary filmmakers working anywhere in the world today rests on her renowned Salta trilogy, comprising *La cienága* (*The Swamp*, 2001), *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, 2004), and *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), all of which revolve around middle-class women and adolescent girls living in a society marred by hypocrisy, decay, and sexual transgression. Set in the here and now, these films have painted an unflinching and unflattering portrait of the



Lucrecia Martel on the set of *Zama*.

stagnant and downwardly mobile landed aristocracy, its patriarchal structures, and the racism that runs through post-dictatorship Argentine society.

While formally and politically consistent with her previous work, *Zama* clearly marks a new direction in Martel's oeuvre.¹ It is her first literary adaptation, her first period piece, the first to be set outside her native Salta, and the first featuring a male protagonist. It's a leap forward that does not so much capture a world through a heightened realism as thoroughly invent it.

Set in a small town on the shores of a large river (near what today is Paraguay's capital, Asunción, and actually shot in Formosa, in northern Argentina), *Zama* provides a startling portrayal of the conceits of empire and the paradoxes it

Film Quarterly, Vol. 71, Number 4, pp. 33-40, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
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Zama's titular character, Don Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho).

breeds, carefully eschewing genre-driven formulas and relying on fantasy and imagination, sometimes to an outrageous degree (such as one scene featuring a steam bath in the sweltering heat of the Chaco region). As someone who lacks complete control over his fate during his stagnant stay in the province, Zama is no typical colonial hero. Nor is his story a typical historical epic: he suffers as much from geographical uprooting as from his self-perception as a second-class citizen, constantly wavering between frustration and expectation. Instead of uniformed crowds or grand battles, there are only skirmishes that end as abruptly as they start.

Much of the story takes place not in grandiose buildings but ramshackle huts that contrast starkly with the royal regalia of the Spanish functionaries. The huts' puzzling architecture and floor plan, captured through tight frames and a highly selective focus, enforce the sense of disorientation that Martel continually sets up in the film. Animals, including a proud llama, frequently wander into the shot, gazing directly into the camera to surreal effect, as if to prove that nature will not bow to civilization. Spanish hegemony is also challenged by the inclusion of many nonwhite characters, both the slaves dressed in velvet frock and loincloth, and members of various native tribes who live as neighbors in the same community, before they assume a crucial role in the last third of the film.

Martel's deliberate use of layered auditory and visual clues, including off-screen space and decentered compositions, creates a state of confusion that reproduces in viewers the anguish and incomprehension that plague her protagonist. Yet time and again this mixture of existential drama and Kafkaesque nightmare is undercut by an ever-so-slightly parodic tone conveyed by Martel's wry humor, through such lines as "Nighttime is safer for the blind" or "Europe is best remembered by those who were never there." Anachronistic non-diegetic music (another first for Martel) further heightens the sense of an imagined past, with no pretense of mimicking the realism of more conventional colonial adventures.

Watching Martel's films can be a hypnotic and deeply immersive experience, often continuing long after the films have ended, and this is particularly true for *Zama*, a film that begs for repeated viewings. While Di Benedetto's novel has a tripartite structure—set in 1790, 1794, and 1799, respectively—and contains numerous indirect references to real events of the time, Martel's adaptation presents a more elliptic sense of time: her episodic storytelling only slowly lets a larger picture emerge.

Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* joins a small but impressive selection of recent Latin American films that challenge and often parody established ways of telling the colonial past, including the Brazilian films *Joaquim* (Marcelo Gomez, 2017) and



Don Diego de Zama (Cacho) on the beach.

Vazante (Daniela Thomas, 2017); Niles Attalah's *Rey/King* (Chile, 2017), and *Jauja* by Martel's compatriot Lisandro Alonso (2014). Martel's style makes the past entirely her own.

One of *Zama*'s most striking features is its color scheme. While muted colors such as a washed-out pink, the ochre of the sandy river banks, and some blue hues dominate for the first hour of the film, bright greens and reds make for a striking contrast during the final third. The stunning, almost blinding cut from a bleached-out river bank to the bright green flora and fauna of the Chaco region of the final section rivals Stanley Kubrick's famous cut from stone age to space age in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

While Di Benedetto died virtually unknown, his novel *Zama* was rediscovered during the last decade by a younger generation of Latin American readers and is now considered a modern classic. Part of the credit for this posthumous recognition goes to the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño. In his short story "Sensini" (1997), he describes a struggling young writer and fervent admirer (a thinly disguised Bolaño) who strikes up a correspondence with the title character, clearly

modeled after Di Benedetto; in fact, Bolaño exchanged many letters with Di Benedetto in the early 1980s when they both lived in exile in Spain.² *Zama* is finally available for the first time in English in a prize winning translation by Esther Allen.³

The publication of an English translation of *Zama* was not the only notable side effect of Martel's film. The renowned Argentine writer Selva Almada visited the film set in Formosa and kept a notebook in which she gathered impressions and short sketches of Martel at work.⁴ Almada focuses primarily on the director's interactions, during casting and shooting, with the nonprofessional actors who are members of the indigenous Qom community and who came to trust and respect Martel. In her slim volume, Almada describes their precarious living conditions, including extreme poverty, short life expectancy, high teenage pregnancy rate, and the widespread use of drugs. Their language is no longer taught, and there are no more shamans, notes Almada, which means that the Qom have been condemned to oblivion.



Authors Gerd Gemünden and Silvia Spitta with Lucrecia Martel (center).

Of Martel, Almada writes, “She delicately and carefully moves within an arc of love and respect. She resembles a nineteenth-century explorer. Or a rare bird from the 21st century.”⁵ This last image of the *rara avis* is a reference not likely lost on a Latin American audience, comparing Martel to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Mexican nun and poet celebrated for generations as a baroque genius of the colony for the breadth of her knowledge, her imagination, and her brilliance.

A very different account of the same location shooting is provided in Manuel Abramovich’s documentary *Años Luz* (*Light Years*, 2017), which, like *Zama*, premiered at the Venice International Film Festival. The film takes its title from an email Martel sent to Abramovich, in which she responds to his request to film her by stating, “I’m light years away from being a protagonist in a film.”

Luckily for him—and Martel’s public—this was not her last word. Not your usual making-of, *Años Luz* is a very personal portrait of a woman deeply immersed in her work. We watch Martel directing actors, exchanging notes with her team, and at times getting irritated with Abramovich’s distracting presence on the set. As in his documentary *Soldado* (*Soldier*, 2017), Abramovich favors an observational stance with little camera movement. He carefully captures Martel’s perfectionism, her obsession with such details as the pronunciation of a certain word or the use of an accent or an intonation, or the exact placement in the frame of animals (who refuse to follow direction). Here, too, her sense of humor comes through, as when she dryly comments on the interference of airplane noise, “Is today National Aviation Day?”

After its premiere at the Venice Film Festival, *Zama* went on to festivals in Toronto and New York, among many

others. It had a warm welcome in Martel’s native Argentina, with an unexpectedly strong box office, and was selected as the country’s official submission to the Academy for the Best Foreign Film Award.⁶ It was released in the United States by Strand Releasing in the spring of 2018.

GERD GEMÜNDE AND SILVIA SPITTA: The first reviews of *Zama* have come out—are you happy about the overwhelmingly positive reception?

LUCRECIA MARTEL: This is my first film release during the era of social media (I am not on Twitter or Facebook), and I am stunned by the speed of the process and how quickly everyone either praises or condemns. After the premiere, I was relieved to see how people from many different cultures appreciated different aspects of the film, how they picked up on distinct parts or subtleties.

I always trust that the spectator is smarter than what the market believes. This film is not made with an eye towards the market. The market has a reaction time of a few months; this film needs ten years. Let’s not forget that *Zama* the novel needed fifty years to be recognized.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: With this film, you have broken new ground in many ways. One striking difference is that this is your first film with a male protagonist. Did that change your approach to how you tell the story?

MARTEL: Not really. I would not say it’s a feminist film, but more so than the others. Particularly in Latin America, men are brought up to achieve things, while women are much more prepared for failure, [and consequently] to have to do other things. I think that the lesson of *Zama* is a lesson that we women learned long ago. This is a transference of wisdom that we could make to the world of men. Because if you’re not prepared for failure, the frustration and violence are enormous. In Argentina, every 16 hours, a woman dies at the hands of her [male] partner or ex-partner or some family member. When a country is economically in shambles and the prospect of being provided for is diminished or has disappeared, the only territory over which you can exert control is your wife or partner. If she falls out of love or falls for another man, the inferno begins.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: Your protagonist Zama experiences this lack of control over his own fate. In Spanish, the verb *esperar* means both to wait and to hope. The novel builds on this double meaning: Zama waits and hopes and waits and hopes, ultimately in vain. At the very end of the film, you give this lack of hope a more positive spin, in that Zama tells the bandit Vicuña Porto (Matheus Nachtergaele), “I will do you

the favor that no one did me and tell you that there is no hope.” Can you comment on this?

MARTEL: The notion that there is no hope is very anti-Catholic. Catholicism always tells us to endure poverty, pain, and suffering because there will be a reward in the afterlife. It was important for me to counteract this belief, so we created a film without any references to Catholicism. You will notice that there is not a single crucifix in the film—not on the wall, not on the furniture, not around people’s necks. I wanted to create a world without Catholicism, even if that is historically incorrect: to imagine that the power of the church was not that homogeneous, that the world was more diverse—because power is never *that* powerful. History tells us that the submission of the indigenous people was absolute, and that is impossible because submission is never absolute. Not even in the concentration camps was despair absolute—that is, not even in the worst of places. This is why we included many small gestures of irreverence on the part of the black and indigenous characters in the film. The only thing that will save humanity is to avoid complete homogeneity. Homogeneity is the end of every organism. Life is that which is diverse; diversity is the ABC of life.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: The nonprofessional actors play a very significant role in this film. Who are they, where are they from, and how did you cast them?

MARTEL: The black actors are from Senegal and Haiti, many of them recent immigrants to Argentina. The natives are Guaraní, Qom-lek, and Pilagá; and working with them was very interesting because everything was an invention—their haircuts, the clothes, the feathers, the colors. Initially, they assumed that they should play themselves, but I explained to them that they should act as if they were somebody else, somebody fictitious, and they really enjoyed that. The interaction with indigenous communities is always difficult. These are very poor people who are always in need and thus always asking for something, which makes you feel uncomfortable. And because of this guilt, your relation with them is always somewhat paternalistic. But we found that one way of establishing a certain form of equality was by asking them to talk about their dreams. And it turns out that we all have the same kind of dreams. In dreams, there is never a lack of money, an *indio* can fly, a white person can fly. We all have the same abilities and powers—it seemed important to remember that.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: How did you communicate? Did you have a translator?

MARTEL: I had a translator for those who spoke very little Spanish.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: There’s a whole cacophony of languages in the film, much of it not subtitled. Can you describe how you conceived and constructed the different languages heard in the film?

MARTEL: Even though it’s a period piece, we did not want the Spanish to sound entirely old, only slightly so. It had to sound like today’s Spanish and not be too solemn—that was very important for me. In Mexico, they invented a “neutral” language to export *telenovelas* and commercials to the rest of Latin America. They made an analysis of the most-used words. Should a refrigerator be called *heladera* or *nevera*? They chose *nevera* because it is used in more countries. To that invention, we added the different dialects of the regions of Argentina, plus Portuguese and the mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, or *Portugnol*, which is a phenomenon of the border. Those red-painted natives you see are supposed to be Guaycuru, but they speak Qom. The Guaycuru language, spoken by the natives who attacked in the eighteenth century, is extinct.

Nothing of what you hear is real; it is completely anachronistic. No one spoke in that manner at the time. I wanted to capture the beauty of a diverse world. The film also needed a strong Latin American presence. We did not want it to be an Argentine film, and the most logical co-producer was Brazil, both because of the significance of the Brazilian film industry and the subject matter of the film.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: There are many changes from the novel. One of them is that the protagonist in the film is much more likeable than the Zama in the novel. Why did you make this change?

MARTEL: If you have an unlikeable main character, you will need to make the film much longer so as to explain the character in more detail. What I carried over from the novel, however, is the somewhat ridiculous or absurd tone. The film is not a serious depiction of the past but pure invention. We aimed for a tone that was not too serious, sometimes even slightly parodic. And we omitted many of the violent scenes, particularly the violence against women. I do not care to watch that, nor to film it, because the camera can become complicit in the violence. Nor did I want to show the blood when Zama’s hands are amputated. It is enough to hint at it.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: Prior to *Zama*, you worked on an adaptation of *El Eternauta* [The Eternaut, or Traveler of Eternity], an Argentine science fiction comic from the late 1950s by Héctor Germán Oesterheld, on which you spent almost two years before the project had to be abandoned. Did anything from this project carry over into *Zama*?



Bright greens saturate the landscape in *Zama*.

MARTEL: Since *El Eternauta* is a science fiction comic, we thought a lot about time and how we are always ready to imagine the future. But what happens when you apply that freedom of the imagination to thinking about the past? So we kept the same arbitrariness that you have in science fiction for our recreation of the past, and we turned the past into pure invention, pure fiction. This was ultimately a very liberating and entertaining process. You can only invent the past; you cannot recreate it.

For the film, it was important to invent a coherent universe and not repeat what the history books tell us. History is the history of those who won. You have to find other ways of representing the past, to introduce a political element—but we also used common sense. In a lot of period films set in Latin America, you see soldiers walking around in leather boots, which are completely useless if you're knee deep in water, as we frequently were.

GEMÜNDEN/SPITTA: This is also the first time you shot digitally. Was that a conscious change as well?

MARTEL: It would be very difficult, in fact nearly impossible, to shoot analog nowadays. And whether digital or analog—it's really the same to me. What matters is not the medium, but the depth of the work. There is a certain nostalgia for analog film, and I think it often reflects a mediocre way of thinking about the image. Things are changing, and we have to accept that this technology is more affordable and that it allows us to do what we want to do. And we need to master it.

GEMÜNDEN/SPITTA: Your cinematographer was Ruy Poças, who made several films with Miguel Gomes. What was the look you were trying to create with him?

MARTEL: We wanted to create a look that is different from the many other, mostly European, period films about Latin America. For example, there is no candlelight, no open fire, because you have that in every film. There's also no play of light and shadows on the faces of the characters. That's just too easy. We wanted to create the impression that time has stopped.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: Can you say something about the music, which sounds somewhat anachronistic?

MARTEL: The music you hear is by Los Indios Tabajaras, two brothers from an indigenous community in Northeast Brazil. They dressed up in fantasy costumes and feathers, a bit like Yma Sumac in Peru, but less scandalous.⁷ Their music is from the 1950s, hence the type of music Di Benedetto might have listened to, as he was writing the novel. Los Indios Tabajaras are the sort of Latin American musicians who want to make it in Hollywood by exaggerating the stereotypes. There is a pretentiousness here, which for me is something very Argentine—this desire, wanting to be European, being ashamed to be American. In the novel, one official states, “I’m surprised by so many Americans who do not want to be Americans.”

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: The soundscape is always very important in your films, but it seems even more prominent and audacious in *Zama*.

MARTEL: The audio is loud and screechy and creates the sensation of close proximity. And we used the Shepard Tone, which is an auditory illusion that creates the false impression of a continuously swelling sound, a bit like the optical illusions of M. C. Escher.⁸

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: Initially, Lita Stantic, with whom you worked on your first three features, was set to produce *Zama*. What led to the split with her?

MARTEL: Lita wanted to produce this film the way she had produced films before, when the market for auteurist cinema was still more favorable and when films could be made with four co-producers. (*Zama* has almost thirty producers; it’s crazy.) But these three young guys from Rei Cine—Benjamin Doménech, Matías Roveda, and Santiago Gallelli—had so much enthusiasm it was infectious. They are very talented and they really fought for the film, as did Danny Glover and Gael García Bernal. With all the difficulties we had, they could have left on many occasions, and I consider myself very fortunate that they never abandoned me. I was also really lucky to have Daniel Giménez Cacho [as Zama], the only actor who was present during the entire shoot, and the only actor I considered for the role. It would have been impossible to make the film without him.

I believe *Zama* can be an important precedent for Latin American cinema for how to produce films. We have to find a way of being more ambitious. We cannot only make films about today and what’s close to us, nor can we make films in English, just to guarantee the financing. We have to find a



Don Diego Zama surveys the scene.

way to tell our history, both past and future, without being confined by the market.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: Did you ever think that just as Zama is waiting in vain, the world, too, would have to wait in vain for this film?

MARTEL: Well, *Zama* was almost not completed. I was diagnosed with cancer during post production and was bedridden for almost eight months. But I was never afraid. And if you’re not afraid, the process can be very interesting. My treatment was in Buenos Aires, but my family lives in Salta, so each week one of my siblings would come to help. And my brothers, who had never cooked, even learned how to cook.

It’s almost embarrassing to say this, because it sounds like a cliché, but because of the experience of my illness, my relation to the film changed completely. And I don’t mean only individual changes, which often happen in post production, but my overall relation to the entire film. Individual elements took on a new order, and I inserted several scenes which I had eliminated earlier. For example, I reinserted the scene of Luciana’s servant walking away painfully, because her feet had been mutilated.

GEMÜNDE/SPITTA: The Argentine filmmaker Nicolás Sarquis, a friend of Antonio Di Benedetto and his companion in exile in Madrid, had begun filming a version of *Zama* in 1984, but the actor who played the protagonist, Mario Pardo, abandoned the project after a fallout with Sarquis, and the film was never completed. Did you believe at some point that there was a curse on *Zama*?

MARTEL: When I got sick I began to think that I had been rather naïve not to believe in this pernicious aura and that there might be a world in which I had not believed. I then realized that the story of *Zama* became also my own story—the tremendous effort it took to make this film. When I now

watch the film, I see a man who feels trapped, gets sick, is mutilated, and who at the very end says, “Yes, I want to live.” That’s me—I want to live.

Author’s Note

This interview took place on September 2, 2017, during the Venice Film Festival. Thanks to Lucrecia Martel for taking time out of a busy schedule—and for the Cuban cigars.

Notes

1. At \$3.5 million, *Zama* cost twice as much as Martel’s last feature in her trilogy, a budget made possible only by an elaborate international coproduction of some thirty partners, including Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar, Gael García Bernal, Danny Glover and Joslyn Barnes, and MPM Films’ Marie-Pierre Macia.
2. In Bolaño’s story, the narrator describes *Zama* (renamed *Ugarte*) as a novel “written with the steady pulse of a neurosurgeon.” Roberto Bolaño, “Sensini,” in *Last Evenings on Earth*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2006), 1–18, 5.
3. Antonio Di Benedetto, *Zama*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: New York Review Book, 2016). Because of delays with the film, the release of the novel was twice pushed back. Ester Allen’s preface provides an excellent introduction to Di Benedetto and the world of the novel. As she explains in an October 2017 *Film Comment* podcast with Dennis Lim, Martel was well aware of her translation and anxiously awaited her reaction to the film. See Film Comment, “The Film Comment Podcast: Lucrecia Martel’s *Zama*,” April 10, 2017, in *The Film Comment Podcast*, produced by Violet Lucca, www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-comment-podcast-lucrecia-martels-zama-2/.
4. It was published as Selva Almada, *El mono en el remolino: Notas del rodaje de Zama de Lucrecia Martel* (Buenos Aires: Random House, 2017). The title, “The Monkey in the Whirlpool: Notes on the Filming of *Zama* by Lucrecia Martel,” alludes to the description of a decaying monkey in the river that opens Di Benedetto’s novel.
5. Almada, *El mono en el remolino*, 25–26.
6. Diego Batlle, “It (Eso) sigue primera en Argentina y *Zama* hizo historia,” *Otros*, October 2, 2017, www.otros.cines.com/nota-12587-it-eso-sigue-primera-en-argentina-y-zama-hizo-historia.
7. For an introduction to Yma Sumac, see the *Guardian* obituary: Garth Cartright, “Folk Music: Yma Sumac, Peruvian-born singer marketed in the US as an Inca princess,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/nov/17/yma-sumac-obituary-singer-peru>.
8. The Shepard Tone is an auditory illusion first discovered by Roger Shepard at the Bell Labs in 1967. See Robinson Meyer, “The Illusion That Makes It Sound Like a Pitch Is Constantly Rising,” *The Atlantic*, January 28, 2014.