Literal Metaphors
A conversation with film maker Lucía Cedrón

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Traducteur : Traduit de l'espagnol par Roxana Dumble

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1 Introduction: This text was published in the magazine Cultures & Conflits in the section “Regards sur l’entre-deux” (A Look at the “Space in Between”), which the magazine dedicates to cultural and political exchange. The majority of the interviews carried out for this section have been done remotely and, additionally, have involved people who didn’t know each another previously. This conversation is a little different.

2 I met Lucía Cedrón in February 2002; her film En Ausencia (In Absence) had premiered just beforehand. Since then, we’ve seen each other on four or five occasions. We’re not “friends” in the strict sense of the word but we do have friends and relations in common. This relative intimacy guided both the way that the conversation developed and the way that it was transcribed. Beyond this, it was her latest film Cordero de Dios (Lamb of God) that inspired our meeting. The film is linked to Argentina’s recent history, just like En Ausencia, and particularly (although not solely) to the political context of the 1970s. One of the Director’s principal concerns was to follow the thread that led from the 1970s to the present day. This was the backdrop for the conversation that we were aiming for; a “conversation” rather than an interview and a “conversation” that interspersed with questions that kept coming from both sides. The transcript incorporates parts of this conversation. The conversation’s central theme concerns the relationship between reality and fiction, which is pivotal in Lucía Cedrón’s approach. Although the film Cordero de Dios was partly based on her own personal family history, it’s aimed (in her own words) at “talking about other things”. On my part, I didn’t want to insist on these more personal and autobiographical aspects, but nor did I openly avoid them. They are there, as a deep-seated part of the reflections that result and that exceed them, perhaps.

3 The meeting took place on 21st May 2008, in a public spot. Here and there, the transcript includes some “secondary” dialogue with regard the main topic of conversation. More specifically, reactions such as silence, laughter and interruptions are mentioned on
A synopsis of *Cordero de Dios*: “In 2002, at the height of the Argentine economic crisis, Arturo, a 77 year old vet, is kidnapped in Buenos Aires. His granddaughter, Guillermina, who is 30 years old, must negotiate the payment of his ransom with the kidnappers and asks her mother for help. Her mother, Teresa, still lives in France, having gone into exile in the 70s with her young daughter because her husband disappeared.

In the present day and under current circumstances, Teresa must regretfully return to Argentina. Guillermina and Teresa move negotiations regarding Arturo’s release forwards and, consequently, both relive painful memories from the past when Teresa was kidnapped by parapolice forces. Arturo is therefore his granddaughter’s responsibility. Little by little, Guillermina, now an adult, discovers more about her Grandad’s role in her mother’s release in 1978.”

Antonia García Castro (A.G.C.) : Do you remember the poem *Lluvia* (Rain) ?

Lucía Cedrón (L.C.) : Which poem ?

A.G.C. : The one by Argentine poet Raúl González Tuñón...

L.C. : Let’s see, recite it. I hope the good man will forgive me... González Tuñón is for me, and more than anything, a guy who sings fantastic songs. Hum me the music and I’ll tell you the lyrics.

A.G.C. : ‘And so we understood that the rain was also beautiful. Occasionally it gently falls and you think of cemeteries, abandoned. Occasionally it pours and you think of the tidal waves...’ I don’t remember how it continues... It’s a really long poem that alludes to many things, it’s a story of love, and it ends with the phrase ‘And all the same, I wanted to talk about the rain...’ As a beginning, it really grabbed my attention because it seems that something’s happened previously that you don’t know about... And when I went to see the film a few days ago, I thought about many things, amongst them the poem *Lluvia*. Afterwards we spoke about doing this interview and I felt the urge to ask you if you like the rain... if you have memories about rain... whether you dislike the rain...

L.C. : Have you seen the film *Lluvia* ?


L.C. : A friend of mine made a film called *Lluvia* [...]. Yes, I like the rain. Of course I like the rain. In truth, all states (that is, all particular circumstances) are beautiful if you know how to navigate through and learn from them. I do not fear states of time or states of being. There are times that are more pleasant than others. I’m not sure what else to tell you... without starting to cry.
A.G.C.: It’s fine. What is it that makes a cinematic work for you? At what point are we talking about a work of art?

L.C.: I don’t have that many problems with the phrase “work of art”; I’ve got more difficulties with the word “art”, with lots of “r”s. Generally speaking, I like to define myself as a storyteller rather than a film maker, as a craftswoman rather than an artist. A craftsman or woman probably puts the same care, the same effort and the same determination into their craft as an artist does. The difference is that the craftsman or woman is aware that they are reproducing something that already exists; a model, which could be their own. And nevertheless, each one of their creations is unique. Conversely, an artist, or those who are recognised or make a name for themselves as such, will always take another view, which I don’t find as interesting. Not to say that my work cannot be considered an artistic creation, and very proud I am too; I mean to say that I would not define it as such. I am aware that for all works of art, for all creations, you need to both work hard and love what you do.

Generally speaking, I believe that I chose this trade because I’ve always enjoyed being an onlooker, “I like to be told stories, I’m going to start telling stories”, it’s that simple (and complicated at the same time). In general, I make a good audience member. When you should cry, I cry, when you should laugh, I laugh. If I don’t understand the storyline. If I do understand the storyline, I get bored. It has nothing to do with content; there isn’t a set of rules for what’s contained in a creation, in a work. It makes no difference to me if you’re talking about a recipe for rice pudding or a thesis on the political reasons behind the Second World War. If when you’re voicing something, on either of these two topics, the rice pudding recipe or the political reasons behind the Second World War cause you to suffer sleepless nights; if the weight of the problem and looking into it more deeply keeps your stomach in knots, then all is well (and I’m telling the truth about the recipe, I come from a family that adores the arts in general, and culinary art in particular). If this doesn’t happen then I think that there’s a problem because it will come across on screen. If, when you’re voicing something what you’re saying doesn’t matter to you, how can it matter to me, as an onlooker? That’s why, at times, it’s so difficult to create something, to create a work of art. It’s like being in love, you can want to be in love but it’s not up to you, it either happens or it doesn’t, and if it does happen then you can’t sleep at night. If you want to tell a story, make a film, it’s the same. There comes a time when there are two or three things going round and round in your head making you suffer sleepless nights. But not in a bad way. They can be remarkable dreams that keep you on tenterhooks, driving you to make sense of them, which is a beautiful paradox for me; that your dreams might keep you awake. In the words of Paul Claudel, whose ideologies are not my cup of tea, but who’s written some interesting verses and was, nonetheless, an important philosopher “Je veux rêver avec les yeux grands ouverts” (I want to dream with my eyes wide open). Well, I completely agree with this maxim as a starting point for any artistic creation. You have to be wide awake in order to dream. So, getting back to your question on cinematic works; any creation is a work of art. Uncle Albert used to say that every day you should add and not subtract. If you go along, adding every day, whatever the source, you’re already creating a work of art. And then, the cinematography comes next, it’s a feasible resource but with the aforementioned provisos. With notions of craftsmanship, work, dreams, affection and the love that you put into what you do. If something walks like a duck, talks like a duck, does everything like a duck, what is it? A duck.
A.G.C.: So... you're a storyteller... who works with images...
L.C.: Spot on. That's how I like to define myself. I like to imagine it. There's a maxim that guides me in this work, which someone who's taught me a lot about cinema told me. The first time I heard him say it, I thought it was an atrocity. I told myself that he obviously wasn't right in the head, precisely because it didn't seemed applicable to "art". At the time, I had more of an affinity with capital letters given that I had grown up in France. Today, I write every letter in capitals... Yes, because the beauty of art is poetry; it's being able to say everything without saying everything, encouraging the reader and writer to fuse imaginations, naming the unnameable. Yet, there's a feeling that the reality you're describing is always slipping through your fingers, like grains of sand. Poetry is one of the linguistic or literary forms that comes to me most often... in order to live a better life. There are others who prefer different narrative structures. Poetry is a very clean channel for me, yes... very clean and very open, very convincing, it has no geography and no history, or rather it does but does not pass judgement, bringing with it the possibility of a synthesis between the "nameable" and the "unnamable"... Generally speaking, I like paradoxes very much and poetry is a paradox in itself. So what art has, contrary to other forms of expressions, is poetry... I'm lost... I was going to tell you something else.

A.G.C.: Someone told you something that seemed an atrocity at the time.
L.C.: Thanks. "Everything that's unnecessary is immoral." And so, I jumped in at that point, "How? That cannot be, how can it be immoral?" What does this phrase refer to? It alludes to the fact that everything is subjective; the main focus is trying to decide what morality is and which moral stance you take. I don't know if that's what this person meant, but that is how I, personally, have used the phrase since. All resources, all of the official, aesthetic, economic and conceptual resources that are needed to create a cinematic work, serve a purpose, whatever it may be. And so, everything that's unnecessary, everything that doesn't serve this purpose, is immoral. It becomes an accessory; it becomes part of the ego, a simple, meaningless, intellectual piece of work.

Let me give you an example from Cordero de Dios; the passing of time within the same sphere. As a resource, it's both official and aesthetic. It's not a whim. It's the synthesis of a very concrete idea that I am wholly convinced by; that you're always living with the present and with your entire past. One, very graphic, example is the table at which we're sitting; and it's an example I often use. Someone looking at the table wouldn't know that it's 2008. There's an MP3 player, a computer; it could well be 2004. A mobile phone, but it could be a model from 2000, while this [a cup] could be from the 90s and this [a glass] could be from the 80s. You're always living alongside the present moment and all previous chapters of history, through tangible objects, just as through others. Yet, I believe that memory is whimsical and devious, coming and going with time, when it pleases and how it pleases. On screen the idea was to begin in one time-sphere and continue in another, but within the same space, as that's how you live with your memories, emotions and so on. As a resource, which is both official and aesthetic, it's completely in keeping with this idea, which is where the "morality" comes from. These concepts, these ideas, help to steer us in the right direction [silence].

A.G.C.: Let's see... I have several questions. I'm trying to decide which ones to prioritise...
L.C.: Tell me a few if you like? And then we'll decide what to do.
A.G.C. : Yes, we could do... In truth, it’s the roads that lead to Rome that I’m interested in... So, I’ve seen three of your films. In the context of this interview, I’m most interested in En Ausencia and Cordero de Dios, which are connected by political facts.

L.C. : Correct.


L.C. : Everything needs a direction.

A.G.C. : Honestly, I believe that they’re “connected”.

L.C. : I believe you.

A.G.C. : There was a type of cinema that focused wholly, when it came to politics, on criticism and partiality. (It’s still around today but used to be more important, shown in the 60s and 70s.)

L.C. : As a matter of fact, it’s a genre: political cinema.

A.G.C. : In my opinion Operación Masacre (Operation Massacre) by Argentine film maker, Jorge Cedrón is the paradigm of this genre. I’m not sure if “paradigm” is the right word because, in truth, the film is completely atypical. What is it? Fiction? Documentary? In fact I wanted to ask you another question on opting for fiction or documentary. Why choose fiction? Why not documentary?

L.C. : I’ll answer that immediately if you like. It’s irrelevant. In my opinion. Whenever Jorge Cedrón made a fictional piece, he would always add a documentary slant. And when he made a documentary, he always added a little bit of fiction. It’s like saying “black & white or colour”. It’s useful for what you’re communicating. “Everything that’s unnecessary is immoral”.

A.G.C. : Yes, what you were just saying made me think your answer would probably be, “it’s irrelevant”. I understand where you’re coming from. Now, getting back to cinema, political cinema... These past few years there’ve been a number of films, especially over there (not solely in Argentina although we are going to focus on Argentina), which show political events from a different perspective. It’s clear that criticism isn’t the main focus. Beyond criticism, an alternative angle exists. But it isn’t the backbone. And if each of these films does indeed present a perspective on the world, it isn’t a world where you can suddenly say where you are, nor what needs be done. [...] So, this genre that I’m thinking about...

L.C. : Give me a name...

A.G.C. : Los Rubios (The Blondes), for example. Los Rubios is a film bursting with open-ended questions. It’s one of many examples. You could compare these cinema genres from many angles, but there’s one in particular that really catches my attention. In Operación, people speak, the characters speak and there’s always an “us”. Julio Troxler asks, “Why do they kill us like this?”

L.C. : I completely agree.

A.G.C. : And over there, in the other cinema style?

L.C. : It’s the culture of self-importance. “Me”, “me”, “me”. “I am called”. It’s very interesting...

A.G.C. : What’s your stance?

L.C. : It’s funny because without knowing it and, as might be expected, whenever I talk about Cordero de Dios I always say “our film”, “we”, the film makers. I’m very aware of everyone joining forces, working together, of everyone caring and connecting hearts and minds, which is what was needed to make this film. Not simply actors and technicians. The credits are four minutes and fifteen seconds long, and not for nothing. Behind the scenes there's a large network of marvellous people, all there for you at
some point so that you can realise your dream. That's an aside. [...] Lots of things are coming to me. Firstly, that in the 70s, the political context and the ideological perspectives were different; the faith held by that generation; the world itself and the desire to take action, along with an awareness of being a part of something, which is very different to today's perception. I'm going to give you an example.

During the 70s, there were some who were, without question, politically involved... (Sadly, this was not the case across the entire country, but that's not important. Let's say that the entire country was politically involved, they just didn't know it. They were oblivious. The country that exists today is the fruit borne of what was done and of what wasn't done. This is what I've inherited hence this is my responsibility. Not in terms of what my parents failed to do, but rather in terms of what I can do with the cards that I've been dealt.) I used to say that they were aware of belonging to a group, to an “us”, and that this feeling was so powerful that the idea of leaving was painful, causing a feeling of a deep sense of abandonment and detachment. They also left when they believed it the best option. Yet these feelings came as soon as they tore themselves away, not simply due to the exile, but rather because of the awareness of having belonged to a group, a project, an ideal. In 2002, I decided to return to Argentina and it was overwhelming because I arrived like the bloke in that joke about the man who drives along the motorway in the wrong direction. Do you know it? A bloke's driving along in the wrong direction, and they announce it on the radio and advise people to take care. The guy hears this and cries out, “Only one?” I was like him, going in the wrong direction. The path chosen by others was very obvious. Lots of people from my generation chose this path when they could. It was each man for himself. End of. And no-one thought badly of this decision, including the decision-makers themselves. There was no guilty feeling. There might have been a general slump, but there was never an awareness of belonging to a group. The ways that each generation behaves in the world have already changed significantly.

[...] I used some of the moments that I've lived through, that I've gone through, or that others have gone through, because of my loved ones and nearest and dearest, in order to tell stories. I used these moments because they're close to me and they're what I know. This is what I call “literal metaphors”. I was going to put the following at the end of the film:

“All fiction is merely a product of reality”.

Lluvia (Rain) by Raul González Tuñón

[Extracts]

And so we understood that the rain was also beautiful.
Occasionally it gently falls and you think of cemeteries, Abandoned. Occasionally it pours and you think of the Tidal waves, which have swallowed up so many Splendid islands, strangely-named. Yet, the rain is healthy and sad. Yet, its pattering rocks our nights to sleep [...] Perhaps our round-faced friends, our photographs, the landscapes that we have Seen together, the many gestures we have encountered or suspected, the Movements and the words of others, everything, everything has disappeared and We are alone underneath the rain, alone in our shared and
Suffocating fate, in our death, lonely and within reach, in our possible Resurrection. [...] We still have the strength to trudge up that steep hill. Recently We’ve discovered bridges and houses, windows and Lights, boats and horizons. [...] Oh, Visitor. I am full of your life and your death. I am injured by your fate. [...] Yet I wanted to talk about the rain, the same, but different, already Falling onto gardens, already dripping down the walls [...], Already flooding the neighbourhoods of our solidarity and of Our hope, the humble neighbourhoods of the workers. The rain is beautiful and sad and perhaps our love is beautiful and sad and Perhaps this sadness is one of happiness’ subtle ways. Oh, intimate, Deep happiness. I am injured by your fate. Oh, rain. Oh, generous one.

NOTES

1. I chose to leave in occasional traces of said “intimacy”, which sometimes manifest as shared knowledge (clarified in the notes), or at times, as spontaneous reactions that either interrupt or change the course of the conversation. Our magazine has published various pieces on the various exchanges that might arise during an interview. One issue in particular focuses on this topic, Les Risques du Métier (Risks of the Trade) no.47, in the Regards sur l’entre-deux section specifically cf. dossier Histoires Peintes Des artistes au camp de Beddawi (Painted Histories of the artists in Beddawi camp) no.68. This interview and its transcription took said reflections into account.


3. Official film synopsis. In order to clarify certain references made by the Director, please note that with regard the trio composed of Guillermina, her grandfather (Arturo) and her mother (Teresa), all is not as it seems. The trio is, in fact, always a foursome. Guillermina’s father’s character (Paco), whose death is shrouded in mystery, is present throughout the film.

4. Reference to the musician Juan “Tata” (“The Daddy”) Cedrón and to his compositions about poems by Raul González Tuñón (1905-1974). Throughout the conversation, there will be various references to Lucía Cedrón’s uncles (her father’s brothers). As well as this, painter Alberto Cedrón (1939-2007) and architect Osvaldo Cedrón aka el “Cholo” (“The Coward”)(1942-2005) will also be mentioned. The name of film maker Jorge Cedrón, Lucía Cedrón’s father, will also come up. He died in 1980, his death also shrouded in mystery.

5. Lucía Cedrón lived in France from 1976 until 2002. Since then she has lived in Argentina.
6. Filmed in 1972 and based on the homonymous account of Rodolfo Walsh, it focuses on the execution of José León Suárez (June 1956). Amongst his many talents, Julio Troxler, who survived execution, acts in the film and plays himself.

7. *Los Rubios* by Albertina Carri (2003). In this film, the Director, daughter of Roberto Carri and Ana Caruso who were kidnapped in 1977, puts on screen her personal quest for information, accounts, photos and places connected to the life and the death of her parents.

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**Mots-clés** : Regards sur l’entre-deux, Argentine, cinéma