

5 Women Filmmakers

March 3–March 20, 2019

In celebration of Women's History Month, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Boston Women's Film Festival co-present five new films by contemporary women. *Visit mfa.org for information.*

Zama

Directed by Lucretia Martel

March 20, 2019

In a blend of fable, parable, legend, and magical realism, Lucretia Martel's *Zama* tantalizes the literary, art-loving filmgoer with unending sensory and intellectual stimulation. Do you love Kafka, Beckett, South American literature, surreal moments of the mind, and stunningly creative use of music, sound, location, and cinematography? *Zama* may have no competitor in recent film art.

The story jumps right in with both structure and moral truth, but takes a few minutes to grasp its richly nuanced sequence. Humor periodically strikes through the “voice” and leitmotif of Latin guitar music in a soundtrack that mainly employs the language of natural sound: silence, cicadas, birds, eerie whistles and rattles, barking, neighing, a lazily sweeping fan, children's laughter or squawks, and women's intimate chatter. Then, there are the blasts of surreal electronic dissonance that represent the human mind when it hears bad news. The music mirrors the emotion, and sound carries the story along more than the characters' dialogue.

South American-born Don Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), in his late-thirties and dressed in a red-velvet jacket and three-cornered hat, holds the prestigious position of magistrate under Spain's colonial governor, in a backwater Paraguayan community in the 1700s. Don Diego does his job as “the crown's functionary,” but he longs for—and persistently requests—a transfer to Lerma, a city near his wife and children. But years keep passing, along with new governors and foiled efforts for a transfer. Don Diego exists in a slow-growing, living nightmare, which can't even end in death. It's a simple storyline but an endlessly rich brew, perhaps because it's based on a highly regarded novel by Antonio di Benedetto (1922–1986) and reimagined by a brilliant director.

The stage is set in one of the movie's first scenes for an immersion in absurdity and magical realism. An indigenous prisoner is set free by Don Diego, but instead of leaving the rough-hewn office, the prisoner bends his head like a torpedo and races straight into a wall in inexplicable self-destruction. Such scenes occur throughout the film, eliciting astonishment on the faces of the witnesses, but that's all. They say and do nothing about such incidents. In the case of the prisoner, the witnesses are Don Diego, his Spanish deputy Ventura Prieto (Juan Minujín), and their young scribe Fernández (Nahuel Cano). We then hear a voice telling us a proverb that foreshadows Don Diego's fate:

There's a fish that spends its life swimming to and fro, fighting water that seeks to cast it upon dry land. Because the water rejects it. The water doesn't want it. These long-suffering fish . . . devote all their energies to remaining in place. You'll never find them in the central part of the river but always near the banks.

The camera then shifts from a scene of swarming fish in water to Don Diego standing alone on his outpost's desolate river embankment—“the long-suffering fish.”



Ambiance and mood define this movie—the tropical heat, languor, and ennui of an isolated, primitive settlement. Time barely moves, torpor settles over everything, which nature's sounds magnify—the cicadas' buzz, a horse's shudder, a gull's caw, the river's eternal lapping, and the sun's relentless pulse. It's barely tolerable for a non-native and shares the oppressive quality of Herzog's *Aguirre on the Amazon*. No wonder Diego and others look for amusement in the “Oriental's” cargo of brandy that arrives, or in sensuous afternoons in bedrooms. (In a nice touch, the rough-and-ready brandy shipment lands on “Getaway Beach.”)

The film moves through dreamlike, often hallucinatory settings and scenes. In one, Diego wanders through disparate rooms that feed through stalls to the object of his desire, Luciana Piñares de Luenga (Lola Dueñas), the elaborately wigged wife of the absent Minister of the Treasury. In this real but unreal realm, animals and humans coexist—goats, dogs, horses, lamas—and move around each other, touching impersonally but familiarly. Diego's mission in seeking out Doña Luciana is twofold: to inform her of the Oriental's brandy shipment and to advance his flirtation with her. Doña Luciana is a notorious paramour, but in mounting scenes she consistently rejects Diego—“Let's not be reckless,” she murmurs like a lover, leading him on.

In another hallucinatory scene, Diego searches for Dr. Palos because the Oriental and his young son have succumbed to a tropical fever. Diego moves through a hazy room where a cigar-smoking hag performs a spiritual rite with a ragtag following. A naked baby crawls around the floor. Diego finally finds the doctor sitting under a table in a dead stupor.

In another episode, the governor gallops on horseback into the municipal courtyard, loses his temper when his horse doesn't obey a command, and takes instant revenge on the animal by shooting it. Bystanders, including Diego, stare at the scene, but as usual say and do nothing, for it's just another everyday occurrence in their distorted cosmos.

Much later in the film, a tribe of blind people wander through the mysterious night woods where Diego and his fellow bounty hunters (of the legendary *Vicuña*) sleep. We hear strange, haunting music. The campers lie still, watching these ghostly, humming figures as they untie and steal the campers' horses in their seamless glide through the trees. Soon after, a warrior tribe with red-stained bodies upend the posse in a series of surreal, violent scenes—mirroring the increased surrealness of Diego's mind. At this point, he simply accepts what comes, too beleaguered and demoralized to care, or to try to rationalize human life. Everything we see through his eyes is skewed, bizarre, corrupt, or inhumane, such as, early on, the Oriental's son being carried in a crude chair on the back of a slave. The distance from shore to settlement isn't far, but “class” has to be distinguished in this cruel way. Similarly, at Doña Luciana's house, a slave sits utterly still like a bronze statue, pulling the rope of a sweeping fan for the duration of his life. Its languid, perpetual rhythm with a monotonous squeak emphasizes the human torture.

The film has a subplot of *Vicuña* Porto, a violent outlaw no one has ever seen. He's either alive or dead, real or mythical, and he's a force to be reckoned with in the colony's life and adds a neat twist to Diego's denouement. As the movie winds up with the bounty hunters now starved and tattered after years of fruitless search, one of them, “Gaspar Toledo,” who might actually be *Vicuña*, spits at Diego, “It's just a name, that's all!” He means *Vicuña* is a name that embodies all the evil perpetrated by man.

Like Odysseus's impediments to reaching Ithaca, Diego meets obstacle after obstacle in his effort to transfer home to his wife and children. The first governor, who has put him off for years, punishes Diego for getting into a brawl with his deputy Ventura, a real Spaniard working for the crown, not an American Spaniard like Diego, or as the governor hurls at him: “an American passing for Spaniard.” A lama brushes against Diego as he gets this news, absurdly, but also grouping Diego in the animal's lower status. The next governor spends his time gambling and playing games. When forced, he pays sadistic lip service to helping Diego. Meanwhile Diego's psychic and physical states continue to decline. He's demoted to filthy, decrepit housing near the indigenous people, including Emilia, mother of his illegitimate toddler. In his new room, one of his wooden crates of belongings suddenly moves across the floor. He's told by his

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Ophelia (1851-1852), Sir John Everett Millais, Tate

scribe Fernández that there's a boy inside. Oh, that explains it—a boy inside. Nothing unusual. At this juncture, Diego's official jacket has become ragged, his hat tattered, and his face worn. By the time the next governor arrives, which is years later, Diego is gray-bearded with dead eyes. He has lost faith but still retains a drop of hope that he might yet escape by joining the richly clad governor's "posse" heading out to capture the mythical villain Vicuña.

The last scene is apocalyptic. A dazzling sight beholds us—a river covered in ultra-verdant aquatic moss and studded with fantastical trees. It's unnatural. It could be paradise or purgatory. Diego, an ashen corpse but not quite dead, floats in the river's viscous green in a rudimentary basin. An indigenous boy is above him, staring in awe at Diego's horrid, maimed condition. Finally the boy asks harshly, "Do you want to live?" It's the movie's essential question to us all. We have just journeyed through a



Charon on River Styx, Soumyajit Dey, India

true rendition of life, of the human condition and its inherent, incorrigible vileness—"Do we want to live?"

The floating boat reminds us of both Ophelia drifting down the river and of Charon crossing the River Styx with his latest passenger bound for Hades. Diego may be caught between two worlds—the sticky unreality of the green "non-paradise" that symbolizes "reaching home," and the black depth of human souls desiccated and decayed from their class hubris, their greed, power, and inhumanity. As a last touch, the folksy, ironic Latin guitar music pipes in, laughing at all of us.

Gail Spilsbury is the author of four books and publisher at Bergamot Books (bergamotbooks.com). Her Boston City Paper film reviews are archived at gailspilsbury.blogspot.com. Her fiction podcast set in Boston, Red Line, can be heard on iTunes.

