

Light and Its Secrets: Sandra Luz López Barroso

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An abiding prejudice about anthropological or ethnographic cinema is that—while the filmmaker cannot forgo ethical questions about their relations to their subjects—other philosophical or indeed mythological questions about the nature of their medium must yield to absolute documentation of the subjects themselves, leaving those further “formal” questions to supposedly esoteric experimentalists. The Oaxacan filmmaker and anthropologist Sandra Luz López Barroso breaks with the dichotomies sustaining this prejudice by always answering to the fact that her medium, the basis of those articulations by her eye, ear, and handheld camera, is essentially shared with her films’ subjects. This shared medium consists in the way that light and shadow manifest on surfaces in the Afro-descendent community of San Nicolás de Tolentino, in the Costa Chica of Guerrero, Mexico, as well as the way that everyday rituals in that community move, stop, and proceed, and the related exigencies of working through a feeling of loss or mourning.

We see the communicative powers of light declared in the opening moments of López Barroso’s 2017 medium-length film *Artemio*, as the nine-year-old boy of the film’s title plays a guessing game with his mother, Coco. (They are, respectively, the great grandson and granddaughter of López Barroso’s late, dear friend in the Costa Chica, Doña Catalina Noyola Bruno.) Artemio says in English, “I spy with my little eye something that’s color white.” It’s in fact “la lluvia” (the rain), as he reveals in emphatic Spanish, even though his mother attempts to correct him that rain is colorless. Already the movement between opacity and transparency in their guessing game is paralleled by their movement between the two languages, a consequence of their lives spent in transit between Mexico and the U.S. Is Artemio wrong to continue insisting that rain is colored white? Thanks to Artemio, we start to look anew at how the drops of rain and light hit the surface of the window of the bus that he and his mother are riding, and as a result of this the surface of our own screen; we now *also* see those little dots as white or opaque. Thus is the basis of López Barroso’s camera’s identification with Artemio, whose singular and creative ways of seeing, of drawing, of loving his sister and his mother, and of valuing (he appears more excited about receiving from his mother ten pesos to play old arcade games than to receive a hundred), buoyed by living among

multiple languages and cultures, are encapsulated in his mother's abbreviation of his name as *Arte* ("art").

Do others see Artemio as López Barroso's camera does? In a virtuoso passage of slow, handheld camera movement attuned to human figures' intimate, corporal rhythms, López Barroso closes in on Coco and her partner Luis as they exaggeratedly "swim" up to a doorway in order to kiss—a kiss that's deliberately interrupted by Artemio holding up a green plastic bucket, a gesture that could very well be a ludic response to López Barroso holding up her camera on the other side of the couple. Artemio and the filmmaker are united by the question, expressed at the level of their hands' gestures, of whether they will be allowed into some private world or other.

The child's itinerant observations are again pointed up in a dialogue with his mother, as they walk past the sounds of a wind instrument-lined funeral march. "What are they celebrating?", Artemio asks. Coco's first impulse is to deny that it's a celebration, though she then reconsiders, stepping closer to Artemio's ways of seeing and hearing: in the Costa Chica, they bring the music into the home because the person has passed to "another realm, another stage." If we approach the film *Artemio* retrospectively—that is, in having seen López Barroso's follow-up feature *El compromiso de las sombras* (*The One Amongst the Shadows*, 2021)—we might suspect (as it happens, correctly) that hidden within the earlier film's mostly offscreen funeral sounds is none other than the later film's protagonist, Lizbeth, the transgender woman funeral orator who led the burial of Doña Catalina in 2007. Across López Barroso's work, the Costa Chica is shown to be a communal world, marked by shared circuits of ambulation and coincidence.

The myriad ways that light has of striking the surfaces of San Nicolás in *The One Amongst the Shadows*—whether as lightning, candlelight, sunlight, or moonlight, and often in contrast with bright electric bulbs—remind us of our most natural and familiar forerunners and survivors of cinema. Colored transmission of candlelight across the petals of gladioli carried by mourners who are led by Lizbeth, and mirrored by an earlier shot of candlelight across a thin blanket, in turn remind us of our most natural and familiar cinematic filters. Calmly swinging in a hammock at night, Lizbeth speaks of death's secrets, invoking both the "heavy shadows" of those who have died with projects left incomplete on earth (and thus relying all the more on mourners' prayers) and the "shadows" of those hidden elements that the living can barely glimpse. Hence the conceptions of their mediums shared by both Lizbeth and López Barroso: not of exposing secrets (as in brusque invocations of the camera's interrogatory powers), but rather of sustaining the very relations between light and dark that make secrets possible.

These heavy shadows effect a startling return in the film's remarkable deployment of Lizbeth leading mourners in the ritual of *uplifting* the deceased's shadow that marks the end of the ninth day of grief (the very day, she had earlier said on the hammock, that the agitated dead can return to herself and to their loved ones in dreams). "We're not uplifting this cross," she says of the white chrysanthemum-dotted cross that had accompanied the casket, remarking that it is just a piece of wood: "But beneath it, there's a shadow and we're uplifting it." Lizbeth's role is to remind the mourners that the slow, conscientious movement of the deceased's shadow by means

of raising the cross upright depends on nothing but themselves and their own collective efforts.

An unanticipated effect of this moment is to call our attention to how the entire film is structured by the demands of uplifting: its opening shots are of the ground—reflecting pools of water, grazing horses shot at their level; then, pivoted by ritual, its closing shots look ever upward, to the sky and a concluding moment of dawn's light striking a cloud above San Nicolás. Relying on a primordial (even, in a sense, ancient) idea of cinema as ultimately an assembly of shadows, López Barroso's work is not just the representation of the ritual of the uplifting of the shadow, but its adaptation and transmutation over the course of a whole film.

Indeed, both *Artemio* and *The One Amongst the Shadows* build upon the possibilities of abbreviating a form of life—with a recognition of both the limits and powers of such short sketches—in punctuating everyday moments by sunrise and sunset. Thus, López Barroso's films provoke the question of whether shared responses to the fluctuations of light might be a more than sufficient basis for recognizing a shared (local, regionally inscribed) humanity, and thus for imagining the future projection of a community.