

## A Battle with Masculinity

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*Contracorriente* [Undertow]. (Perú, 2010). Director: Javier Fuentes-León. 1:50”

The film *Contracorriente* (Undertow), directed by Javier Fuentes-León, is a story of a Peruvian, married, fisherman named Miguel who is struggling to cope with his sexuality after having an affair with a painter named Santiago, in a town with very strong, traditional familismo and machismo beliefs. The main theme of the film is the constant battle with Latino machismo and familismo, which Miguel is constantly fighting with as seen with his encounters with his wife, friends, and rest of the village. Machismo is the belief that there is some type of pride with being “manly,” the man must act in the way that benefits his responsibilities to his family. Acting in any way that goes against machismo beliefs is very frowned upon because there is supposed to be pride in exuding machismo. Familismo goes hand and hand with machismo as it is the value of closeness and loyalty to family. Any time someone disrupts the *status quo* of the family and familismo, he or she is criticized and looked down upon severely. Latino and Latin American families strictly follow the patriarchy of the male being the head of the family. Therefore it is clear to see what an uproar Miguel’s affair caused in that small town. He not only upset the patriarchy by causing Mariela to leave him, but he also upset the familismo. Subsequently, Miguel was not exercising machismo, which caused the village to disengage and disassociate with him. Javier Fuentes-León utilizes several different cinematic techniques and camera techniques in order to portray Miguel’s perpetual battle with Latino machismo, familismo, and patriarchy.

The use of deep focus and depth of field are very apparent in *Contracorriente*. Deep focus and depth of field can be described as “[not being interchangeable] but

deeply interconnected because the technique of deep focus is dependent on a wide depth of field. Depth of field is a cinematic practice whereas deep focus is both a technique and film style [...] Depth of field refers to the focal length any particular lens can provide. Greater depth of field is achieved by a wide angle lens and it is this type of lens that achieves deep focus. With deep focus, all planes within the lenses focus are in sharp focus” (Hayward 98). Fuentes-León’s reasoning behind using this technique is to control the viewer’s focus and to reinforce the sense already contained in the narrative so that the audience elaborates more punctually the cultural criticism on the machismo and patriarchy of the film. For example, certain images in scenes are blurred out while others are very clear in order to force the viewer to focus on specific things.



In this scene, deep focus is being used in order to show Miguel’s deep care and happiness for his newborn baby. His wife, Mariela is visible in the background sleeping and their baby is visible, but both of them are blurred. Miguel and his facial expression is very clear, making him the focus of the scene. This use of deep focus aids in the depiction of Miguel struggling with the happiness his family provides him, but the betrayal he commits by continuing his affair with Santiago because it also provides him with so much happiness.

Javier Fuentes-León also utilizes the camera technique of emblematic shots in several scenes throughout *Contracorriente* (Undertow). Emblematic shots can be

described as, “[acting] as metonymy for the whole film, that is, it would sum up the diegesis of the film” (Hayward 228). For example in the scene where Miguel is looking at the candle that Santiago gave Mariela.



Not only is this a deep focus shot, but an emblematic one because the focus is on Miguel and his facial expressions. The candle is symbolizing Santiago and by having Miguel smiling at it, he is acknowledging the presence of Santiago’s spirit, but it also is symbolizing that he is coming to terms with Santiago’s death and his sexuality. This encapsulates the entirety of Miguel’s struggles throughout the film. Even Hollywood Reporter, Duane Byrge, describes the film stating, “An artist is drowned by the undertow of the Peru coastline, emblematic of his life as a gay man being dragged down by a close-minded Catholic-macho community” (Byrge).

Throughout the film the constant themes of Latino machismo, familismo, and patriarchy are present. In the opening scenes of the film, Miguel is talking to Mariela’s stomach, calling the baby “Miguelito.” At this point, Miguel and Mariela are unaware whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Mariela asks Miguel not to call the baby that way yet because she heard babies in the stomach can hear everything and, if it is a girl, the baby will be confused. This depicts the beliefs of patriarchy of not only Miguel and Mariela, but of the rest of the town as well. This is seen by simply believing that by calling the

baby a male name it will cause the baby to be confused when born. Although this can be seen as illogical, patriarchy needs every individual to know their roles even before they are born, and remain in these roles the rest of their lives. According to the theorist, Lacan, the law of language, known as the Law of Father, follows patriarchal law; “In the Oedipal phase, then, the male child imagines himself to be what his mother lacks and therefore desires – that is, the phallus. However, this is proscribed by the Law of Father, the patriarchal, ‘No’. Prohibition of fulfilling the incestual drive is marked in language. And the child will comply for fear of castration by the father. The male child enters into the Symbolic and adopts a speaking position that marks him as independent from the mother. When the child enters the Symbolic, it enters language, but succumbs to the Law of Father, the laws of society, laws that are determined by the Other [...]” (Hayward 317). Therefore, as described by Lacan, the patriarchal laws are not supposed to begin until the child reaches the age of speaking, the Other always provides a name (a signifier) even before the baby is born and will remain after his/her death. As depicted in *Contracorriente*, Miguel and Mariela are so set in their patriarchal followings that they are imposing these laws of society onto the unborn child. By believing this child’s role in society could become confused simply due to them calling the unborn child a traditionally patriarchal male name, Miguel and Mariela are perpetuating the patriarchal laws that are set in society.

Same happens after the death of Miguel’s cousin at the beginning of the film: Miguel and some other men are in the local bar when Santiago walks in. The men start making homophobic comments about him and then refuse to drink the beers that Santiago sends over as a means of sending his condolences after their friend passed away. The men refuse the beer and send it back, the bartender tells them they are being unreasonable and takes it back. Santiago then brings the beers over again, insists they drink them and leaves. Miguel then convinces the men to just drink the beers. Had a straight man bought the beers, this act would not have been questioned, but because

Santiago was not straight none of them men wanted to be seen as “unmasculine,” something very important to machismo, so they all refused. Other scenes like this can be mentioned because they reoccur a couple times throughout the film. For example, it is made known that Miguel enjoys watching soap operas, Mariela even has a conversation about it with one of her friends early on in the film. Following the discovery of Miguel’s affair with Santiago, Mariela and Miguel attempt to work past it. They are watching T.V. together and Miguel puts on a soap opera and Mariela changes it to soccer. This is something socially acceptable for “a man” to watch sports in her opinion. It would not coincide with machismo for Miguel to enjoy watching soap operas, therefore he has to watch something manly like a soccer game. The question of what it means to be a man is also brought up several times in the film. When Santiago and Miguel get into an argument and are wrestling on the beach, Santiago is lecturing Miguel about him not being a man. Miguel has the machismo idea that if he was gay or bisexual he would not be a man. This is insulting to Santiago because that leads him to question if Miguel does not consider him a man. Latin machismo, familismo, and patriarchy would say that a man is someone with a wife and kids who provides for his family. Miguel cannot bear the idea of being thought any differently than this. The other instance is when Miguel’s cousin begins to question Miguel about his affair with Santiago. He tells him that the village has been talking about it and he does not like hearing that Miguel has been sleeping with a man. He tells Miguel he needs to be a man because he has a wife and a son on the way. Again, audience has to confront the theme of Latin machismo, familismo, and patriarchy. At the end of the film, Miguel finally comes clean about the affair, comes to terms with his sexuality, and gives Santiago a proper burial in order to let his soul rest. As described in classical narrative cinema, “classical narrative cinema, no matter what genre, must have closure, that is, the narrative must come to a completion (whether a happy ending or not)” (Bordwell 83).

The film does not reveal if Santiago's soul is finally put to rest, but it can be assumed that once his body was released into the ocean and Miguel was given closure, that it was. This is not necessarily a happy or sad ending, but it follows the classical narrative cinema by having closure to end the film.

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