

## Drifting/Stagnation: A Temporal Critique of Imperialism in Lucrecia Martel's *Zama*.



Figure 1

Cinema is arguably the most compelling artistic platform through which to explore and analyse time, as time is something that cinema can *do*. By this, I mean that time underlies our very understanding of the cinematic form: through the visual perception of 24 frames per second in line with our experience of clock time, to the more philosophical capacity of the cinema to depict recognition, recollection and dreaming – what Gilles Deleuze refers to as the ‘time-image.’<sup>1</sup>

*Zama* (Lucretia Martel, 2017) is a story, based on the synonymous 1956 Antonio de Benedetto novel, that explores the limits of waiting and of duration. Its titular character, Don Diego de Zama, lives a suspended and solitary existence in his posting in remote Paraguay in the last decade of the eighteenth century under the authority of the Spanish Crown, his inaction within the film a result of his perpetual state of waiting to be transferred to a more desirable location closer to his family in Lerma, Argentina. This desire never transpires, and Zama spends the entire film waiting for a deferred future where he places all his hopes and expectations. The temporality that guides this film is of principal interest. The events we follow do not necessarily occur chronologically, particularly as the film progresses, as *Zama*’s desperate hopefulness is perpetually deferred, with time passing and somehow not passing at all.

In this essay I intend to show how *Zama*’s utilisation of protracted and drifting temporality has the ultimate effect of undermining the *historical time* of imperialism as explored by Bliss Cua Lim and Anne McClintock.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).

Historical time is an imposed, imperialistic temporality placed upon spaces that are colonised, as the means and very justification for their colonisation. Johannes Fabian, author of *Time and the Other*, argues that Western anthropology since Enlightenment has treated newly encountered societies “in their own terms” as opposed to *on* their own terms, meaning that the time of the imperial power is forced upon these *other* spaces.<sup>2</sup> Time itself, as such, was absorbed into the project and mechanism of empire. Lim notes that such absorption can be read as pre-emptive of contemporary capitalism, which dreams of “foreclosing, that is, anticipating and thereby controlling, the disruptiveness of the future.”<sup>3</sup> For the coloniser, who would view time as a linear homogenous progression, the native inhabitants of the ‘new worlds’ they ‘discover’ belong to an anterior or primitive moment of their own past, and not as their own contemporaries. As a result, the colonised are viewed as being outside of the ideology of *progress* that underpins and drives imperialism to this very day, which allows for the ‘discovery’ of already inhabited lands as the occupants are displaced into what McClintock calls “anachronistic space.”<sup>4</sup> This space is “prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place with the historical time of modernity,” allowing a *temporal* difference as opposed to a mere geographical one to exist between colonised and coloniser.<sup>5</sup>

The colonised, viewed in terms of space, and the coloniser, viewed in terms of time, could therefore occupy the same place and yet a hierarchy would exist between them. This colonial trope of, as Lim describes, the “*globe as a kind of clock*,” is what I aim to show as undermined through a close textual analysis of the film *Zama* below.<sup>6</sup>

The cinema of Lucrecia Martel until *Zama* has been characterised by its critical portrayal of the festering middle classes of Argentina in the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Zama* is her first film set outside of the contemporary, making it already infused with time through its depiction of the past. The depiction of history within film and media is an abundantly popular form of story-telling, one that Marcia Landy has noted typically “reveals the excesses of monumental history and its fascination with both the spectacle and the heroic figure.”<sup>7</sup> *Zama* subverts such expectations through its pacing; lack of plot, lack of consequential dialogue, and particularly through its lack of heroic protagonist. A simple, old-as-time depiction of protagonist-as-hero is never realised in Diego de Zama, as within the very first sequence – which depicts him spying on a group of women taking a mud bath – he is revealed to be voyeuristic and violent. As such, we are never fully aligned with Zama, as his trampled hopes that would otherwise produce empathy are displayed alongside his submissive subservience towards the futile and vapid bureaucracy of the Spanish Crown (“We need the boy to confess. And that you find a way to dismiss all charges”), his hopeless and

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014): 39.

<sup>3</sup> Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*: 13.

<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995): 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*: 40.

<sup>6</sup> Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*: 14.

<sup>7</sup> Marcia Landy, “Introduction” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* edited by Marcia Landy, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000): 12.

consistently rejected womanizing (he lusts after the married Luciana Pinares de Luenga who rejects him for his deputy), and the fact he has a child he does not know (“That’s not [your son]. It’s that one.”) with an indigenous woman called Emilia who is entirely disinterested in him (Zama: “I need a shirt.” Emilia: “Am I your wife?” / Zama: “Gifts from Dona Emilia?” Manuel: “They were bought. Not gifts.”). As such, this functionary of colonialism is no hero.

When screened at the London Film Festival in 2017, Lucretia Martel introduced the film by asking for the audience to “be patient.” This notion of patience – caught up as it is with duration, waiting, and perseverance – engages deeply with temporality, and is what *formally* align us as with the lead character of the film. Phenomenologically, *Zama* forces its viewer to feel its protagonist’s isolation and stagnation through its use of the protracted long take, the lack of plot-driving dialogue, and the relative inaction of the plot, all formal qualities typically associated with ‘slow cinema.’ Critical engagement with the political potentials of slow cinema are numerable. Karl Schoonover argues that slow cinema “turns boredom into a kind of special work, one in which empty onscreen time is repurposed, renovated, rehabilitated.”<sup>8</sup> Once freed from cause-and-effect as we are within *Zama*, we as the audience are forced to look elsewhere for meaning within the *mise-en-scène*. Martel herself describes this style of story-telling as the “loosening” of plot, and it is done so in a deliberate effort to force the viewer to experience the same suspension and neglect felt by *Zama* or her other films’ characters.<sup>9</sup> The effect of this is the formal undermining of what could otherwise be seen as a *forward progression* of the narrative, a subversion of expectation if we consider how *historical time* typically directs us.

The ways in which *Zama* interacts with space is another way in which the film plays with our expectations of colonialism. He is consistently framed as an outsider, which highlights his role as colonizer, through the formal ways in which the film positions him within the film’s landscape. Although at the start of the film we are shown him standing on a beach, gazing out over the water, in a pose which renders him in the role of the colonial explorer/conqueror (figure 1), this image is undermined by the fact that he is depicted alongside (and ignored by) the indigenous people behind him, whose interaction with this landscape is one of utility – gathering water for drinking – as opposed to brooding ‘heroic’ surveyance. The nuance of this image is to destabilise its connotations of colonial and masculine imagery of domination and possession, as land here is not a signifier for the potential power of these things, but rather is shown as something tactile, useful, concrete.

Space at other times within the film is withheld, confused, and blocked: we experience elliptical editing, offscreen sounds that appear with no source, and a way of framing that obscures or isolates characters (figure 2). Jens Andermann argues that Martel utilises sensorial uncertainty in her films “*as a mode of narrative*

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Schoonover, “Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema’s Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer,” *Framework* 53, 1, Spring 2012: 70.

<sup>9</sup> Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2009): 185.

organisation.”<sup>10</sup> We are made to feel uncertain continuously throughout the film through the dissolution of space; spatial boundaries melt together in one such moment where Zama enters a space initially distinguishable as a parlour with wigged ladies sat about in period costume, but in turn it appears to also be an artist’s studio, brothel, and stable. This confusion between expected boundaries of space is what gives the narrative its sense of being fragmented: time appears continuous and yet it is ruptured with inconsistencies that are never explained. Space itself, that with which we associate continuity and stability, is unreliable, defective, confusing, unsettling temporal markers.



Figure 2



Figure 3

The uncertainty is built upon by not only confusing space, but by making it absurd. In a formal meeting with the Governor requesting once again a letter of transfer, a llama walks into the office and trots about behind Zama, completely unacknowledged by the narrative (figure 3). Another example is when the next Governor requests a full furniture inventory of the government buildings, resulting in Zama waking to find every item of furniture placed in the buildings courtyard, through which horses and other animals wander and feed. Such moments have the effect of undoing, maddening, and undermining what could otherwise have been a pure existential tragedy. For Joanna Page, in her analysis of Martel’s debut feature *La ciénaga*, but with equal application to what is happening here in *Zama*, “the banal and the irrational always threaten to destroy the last remaining illusions of stability, order, and meaning.”<sup>11</sup> These sequences, in their disavowal of sense and of order, subvert our perceptions of even a tale of anti-hero, and destabilising what might otherwise be moments of narrative progress.

Absurdity, confusion, and a need for patience all accumulate into a general mood of drift that directs the film. Leo Charney explains that “the logic of drift meanders, digresses, floats,” and within *Zama*, the motif of ghostly *otherness* that traverses the film draws our attention to the temporality of waiting.<sup>12</sup> In one inn where Zama stays, dark shadowy figures make him leave his room in curiosity (figure 5), only to be told by the innkeeper that “you are our only guest.” In the final segment, Zama hides as a large group of a hundred or so silent, blind indigenous people walk through his camp at night. Waiting is both dead time and a time

<sup>10</sup> Jens Anderman, *New Argentine Cinema* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012): 160

<sup>11</sup> Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2009): 185.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Charney, *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift* (1998): 17.

of expectancy, and Elizabeth Grosz notes that waiting “is the subjective experience that perhaps best exemplifies the coexistence of a multiplicity of durations, duration both my own and outside of me.”<sup>13</sup> No more is this temporality of waiting felt more than in the onscreen performing body of Zama, whose various appearances – cleanshaven/bearded, impeccably uniformed/dishevelled and dirty, healthy and virile/hollow eyed and wracked with illness – display the passing of time most obviously within the film. Elena Gorfinkel views weariness and fatigue in the onscreen body as “a corporeal threshold made temporal”: the mark of endurance and duration.<sup>14</sup> It is through the performing body that we feel temporality most within the film, its physical exhaustion, aging, decaying, the most visceral markers of the temporal effects on our being. The dedication at the start of the novel is “*A las víctimas de la espera/To the victims of expectation,*” which aptly describes Zama’s tragedy, the film’s response is to dedicate numerous minutes to statically capturing Zama’s weary, waiting, expectant body (figure 6).<sup>15</sup> Stagnant in his waiting, Zama drifts through the film, ghostly, uncertain, floating: in a temporality impossible to reconcile with historical time.



Figure 5



Figure 6

A final disrupting temporality within the film to consider is the temporality of myth brought about by the character of Vicuña Porto – a feared bandit whose presence/absence is felt recurrently throughout the film in references to his questioned status as a possible perpetrator of local crimes or through the frequent and contradictory statements that declare him as dead (“they say you almost caught Vicuña Porto” / “they say he executed Vicuña without mercy” / “we must get rid of Vicuña Porto”). At one point, a Governor wins the dead and blackening “ears of Vicuña Porto” whilst gambling, declaring that they had been “cut off after his execution” and wears them triumphantly around his neck as a trophy. In this scene, where Zama once again asks yet another Governor to write him a letter to the King requesting a transfer, the Governor’s assistant sits staring transfixed at the ears around the Governor’s neck and the film slips us inside his internal monologue using a whispered dreamy voiceover (“*Vicuña Porto is dead. One shouldn’t touch them. Don’t touch. No.*”). He is source of obsession, fear, and twisted admiration: existing outside and beyond the level of

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2004): 197.

<sup>14</sup> Elena Gorfinkel, “Weariness, Waiting: Endurance and Art Cinema’s Tired Bodies” *Discourse*, Vol 34, No 2-3 Spring/Fall 2012, 315.

<sup>15</sup> Antonio de Benedetto, *Zama* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016): 3.

human capabilities, a fact which is exacerbated by his invisibility for most of the film, he is mythologised and canonised as something *other*. Toward the end of the film, after Zama – resigned at last after years of hope to his state of abandonment – joins a brigade sent to capture this dangerous figure of myth. As it turns out, Vicuña Porto and his men are disguised as part of the very brigade sent after them, which destabilises once more Zama’s mission and expectation. With Zama now his prisoner, Vicuña Porto makes a speech that both confirms and perpetuates his myth:

I’ve committed sins. But not all those blamed on Vicuña Porto. Understand? That’s right. The Vicuña Porto they talk about doesn’t exist. It’s not me. It’s no one. It’s a name.

The temporality of myth – outside, beyond, eternal – is important in a criticism of historical time as it reveals an *otherness* to time; one that is out of reach, incomprehensible, contradictory. Zama – as the embodiment of colonizer – encounters this temporality of myth continuously throughout his weary years of waiting at the hands of the colonial Spanish Crown – and as such it challenges his strict adherence to bureaucratic teleological time as it repeats, circles back, undermines.

As such, through its depiction of disrupting, fragmenting temporalities, *Zama* both formally and figuratively critiques the concept of time as history. Time is not something progressive, linear and homogenous; time is plural, divergent, contradictory. Although we don’t live in *Zama*’s colonial era, its time-as-history logic still underpins our everyday, with time having been absorbed into the very mechanisms of power that govern us through capitalism. Although this modern conception of spatialised time is, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “inadequate but indispensable,” any means – be it artistic or otherwise – that seek to highlight the discrepancies at its core, work to dislodge power from today’s neoliberal project.<sup>16</sup>

*These long-suffering fish, so attached to the element that repels them, 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.*

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<sup>16</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008): 25.

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## Filmography

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- La ciénaga*. Lucretia Martel. Argentina: 2001.