Desiring Domestic Workers in *The Maid* and *The Desert Bride*

This article analyzes the representation of feminine desires in two Southern Cone films, *The Maid* (*La nana*, Sebastián Silva, Chile, 2009) and *The Desert Bride* (*La novia del desierto*, Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, Argentina/Chile, 2017), that feature female protagonists who have worked as live-in domestic employees for the same families for over twenty years. Both films eschew traditional depictions of domestic workers as either servile or aggressive to instead present these women as desiring and desirable subjects, thereby questioning how desire and desirability are determined by dominant social norms of femininity predicated on privileges of age, class, and race. Following Rosi Braidotti's work on nomadism, the article examines desire, as depicted in these films, as a fluid notion that emphasizes transformation and the process of becoming. Ultimately the desires that the protagonists experience in horizontal, affective relationships lead them to embrace newfound independence outside of employment.

Keywords

DOMESTIC LABOR

DESIRE

THE MAID

THE DESERT BRIDE

CHILEAN CINEMA

ARGENTINE CINEMA

Date received: 09/12/2019

Date accepted: 28/07/2020

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Two Southern Cone films, *The Maid* (*La nana*, Sebastián Silva, Chile, 2009) and *The Desert Bride* (*La novia del desierto*, Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, Argentina/Chile, 2017), depict the struggles that their protagonists, female live-in domestic workers, face after decades of working in the same households. As both women—Raquel (Catalina Saavedra) in *The Maid* and Teresa (Paulina García) in *The Desert Bride*—deal with changes in the homes where they live and work, they discover and communicate their own desires, leading to personal transformations most clearly expressed through the films’ final scenes. As seen in the images that open this essay, *The Maid* and *The Desert Bride* end with the women moving down deserted roads alone, facing the camera (Fig. 1). These final acts of independence and movement depart from traditional, static depictions of domestic employees as either aggressive and demanding or passive and servile (Vázquez 2014, 166). Although these two maids at first seem to embody the two extremes of these traditional characterizations—Raquel as the first and Teresa as the latter—the films are examples of the new representational paradigm of domestic labor in Latin American cinema that portrays domestic workers as complex persons with their own desires and agency (Shaw 2017, 127; Osborne and Ruiz-Alfaro 2020). To complement their narratives, the films’ framing choices highlight the subjectivity of these otherwise marginalized women by placing them at the center. The changes the maids undergo arise from relationships they develop with other characters (from) outside the households, evident in these final sequences of self-realization, whether physically as in the case of Raquel or spiritually as in the case of Teresa.

This essay looks at instances of desire in *The Maid* and *The Desert Bride*

as transformative moments or forces that complicate the notion of purely “feminine desire” and interrogate desire through an intersectional lens—highlighting above all gender, class, age, and, at times, race.¹ Placing aging women with (sexual) desires on screen draws attention to the limits of both feminist film theory and cinema itself since older women are “figures that people are commonly taught to stare at or look away from out of fear or dread” (Chivers 2017, 73). The filmic depictions of these women’s desires question the idea of who can desire and who is desirable, all stemming from dominant notions of (white) femininity that are built on privileges of class (Cottom 2019, 61–62). For Tressie Macmillan Cottom (2019, 54), feeling desired opens the door to feeling included, equally applicable to the context of domestic labor, in which workers are constantly reminded of their exclusion from employing families. In *The Maid* and *The Desert Bride*, Raquel’s and Teresa’s encounters with peers, whether platonic or sexual, forge a similar sense of inclusion and self-worth otherwise unattainable through relationships with their employers. Domestic workers, as well as older women, whether in film or in society, are often denied an ability to desire; doing so denies their subjectivity, and, in turn, from a legal standpoint, their (labor) rights. Raquel’s and Teresa’s range of desires on screen recognizes them as complex subjects, and highlights and critiques the power hierarchies and social structures that determine desires and desirability. Despite the commonalities between the two films, *The Desert Bride* offers a more radical departure from traditional representations of domestic labor and desire, as will be discussed further.

The potential for (social) change and female empowerment is at the root of Rosi Braidotti’s theoretical “figuration” of the nomad, a postmodern, feminist

Fig. 1.

Top: *The Maid* (Sebastián Silva, 2009)

Bottom: *The Desert Bride* (Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, 2017)

subject in the period of late capitalism and globalization (2011, 4). This nomadic subject is a possibility for social and political transformation because she desires to become, know, and change (262). Comparably, the films present their protagonists as capable of changing not only themselves but the world in which they live, similar to the “multilayered” and “dynamic and changing” nomadic subject who is affected by and can affect others (5). Never finished or complete, this nomadic subject is a process, “made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire” (18). The characters of the films discussed here navigate various intersecting power structures—living in the contradiction of advanced capitalism and a (neo) colonial institution—along with their own desires as they develop a new way of seeing the world and potentially change their labor/material situations. As Braidotti explains, “What sustains the entire process of becoming-subject is the will to know, the desire to say, the desire to speak, to think, to represent” (126). This feminist idea is fundamental for subjects, like these characters, who are often systematically denied the ability to speak. What is said is not at issue but rather the act and ability of expression itself. Although these films largely focus on individual workers—perhaps due to Latin American cinema’s “subjective turn”—they hint at the need for and possible beginning of structural changes (Osborne and Ruiz-Alfaro 2020, 5).² This glimpse of hope and possibility for the future through nomadic tendencies is perhaps more realistic even if less satisfying than radical structural change. As Shohat and Stam have explained, it would be unethical to romanticize the characters of oppressed people so that they alone carry the burden of their emancipation, thus misplacing the responsibility for change from those who perpetuate

oppressive systems (1994, 203). After all, nomadism isn’t necessarily movement, but rather a subversion of norms; it “is the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing” (Braidotti 2011, 66). Along these same lines, Raquel in *The Maid* breaks class norms by jogging, a leisure activity usually reserved for her employers’ class, and Teresa, literally on a journey in *The Desert Bride*, rejects expectations for a normative romantic relationship by having an encounter for one night. The films’ endings thus present desire as a process that liberates and empowers their protagonists, ultimately challenging the power dynamics in which their lives are embedded.

Gift giving

Drawing on Irigaray and Deleuze, Braidotti rejects the association between desire and lack or negativity and instead sees “desire as the positive affirmation of one’s longing for plenitude and well-being. A form of felicity or happiness” (2011, 107). Even when Raquel and Teresa obtain material objects that they are supposed to want according to capitalism’s manufacturing of inaccessible desires and feminine beauty standards, it is the affective relationships with others that truly transform them, as demonstrated through examples of gift giving. Related to this, the films convey their protagonists’ happiness and well-being outside of capitalist consumerism, recognizing that “Beauty is a wonderful form of capital in a world that organizes everything around gender and then requires a performance of gender that makes some of its members more equal than others” (Cottom 2019, 62).

Although Raquel in *The Maid* suffers from melancholia due to the inaccessible desires produced by the distance between her and her employer, she eventually realizes that desire, similar to Braidotti, is based on

affirmation and well-being. Raquel's mistress, Pilar (Claudia Celedón), models femininity and desirability, and the consumer practices to achieve them according to white, Christian standards (Osborne 2020, 54–60). The motif of a sweater represents their relationship, which infantilizes Raquel and makes her feel inferior, frustrated, and alone. While Raquel initially considers herself one of the employing family, her mistress, Pilar, does not demonstrate the corresponding affection and respect. The film opens with the employing family preparing a birthday celebration for Raquel, during which she is visibly uncomfortable since she is technically still at work. Shortly thereafter, alone in her room, she opens the family's gift, a sweater that she throws to the ground after looking at the tag, indicating it is not a name brand (Fig. 2, top). The *mise en scène* of the room, in which a teddy bear sits on Raquel's bed, coupled with her isolation and disappointment in the sweater hint at her distance from and infantilization by the family. The damaging psychological and physical effects of employment are further evident in the box of pills on Raquel's nightstand; she takes painkillers frequently in the film to alleviate her headaches and fainting episodes likely due to exhaustion so that she can continue to work as her employers fail to respect her schedule and routine.³

The next time we see another sweater is when Raquel cleans Pilar's closet, which according to Vázquez represents and models bourgeois values of privacy (2014, 173–74), and, I would add, feminine taste and material desires. Raquel tries on one of Pilar's sweaters and looks at herself in the closet mirror with a posture that communicates possibly an attitude of defiance but that also reflects "the ambiguous feelings of admiration and resentment that domestic workers tend to have for the omnipresent

figure of the mistress" (174).⁴ She is notably alone, confined to the sepia tones caused by the dim indoor lighting (Fig. 2, middle). This second scene juxtaposes Raquel's habit-like uniform and humble bedroom with various objects strewn on the bed and nightstand, with Pilar's multitude of organized clothes in a large walk-in closet. Later, on her day off, Raquel goes to a store to buy the same sweater as Pilar's. Nevertheless, the sweater does not resolve Raquel's frustration, for even though she consumes upper/middle-class tastes and imitates their appearances, these are ultimately inauthentic and inaccessible as they are determined by others.

Eventually collapsing due to the increasing demands of the family, Raquel is forced to rest as other workers are brought to the house to help with her workload. After rejecting the first two women, she becomes friends with the third, Lucy (Mariana Loyola), whose positive attitude and empathy along with her self-confidence help Raquel to open up and leave behind her territoriality. Raquel gives a sweater to Lucy for her birthday towards the end of the film, coming full circle in escaping Pilar's model of desire (Fig. 2, bottom). Prior to this, Lucy invites Raquel to her family's home in the South, an inclusive environment in which Raquel feels genuine affection. In response to this and as a testament to her own change, Raquel's gift giving demonstrates appreciation for their friendship. Pilar and her daughter check the label on the sweater that Raquel gives to Lucy and look at each other, surprised, as Raquel has superseded their own actions and models. The expensive sweater threatens Pilar's social position because it "symbolizes the inalienable character of Lucy and Raquel's desire, the end of a way of solitude" (Vázquez 2014, 175).⁵ Furthermore, Raquel's choice in material and color departs

Fig. 2: *The Maid* (Sebastián Silva, 2009)

from the other sweaters seen in the film, thus communicating both her ability to desire as well as a different type of desire. Whereas the first three sweaters in the film appear more delicate, of a knitted or woven texture with holes, and in dark red or beige tones, Raquel's gift to Lucy is a solid material of dark brown color. The flimsy material in the other sweaters reflects their superficiality while the last sweater depicts the practical use to keep one warm, the status conferred by the brand, and the appreciation of friendship. The lighting choice in this scene also emphasizes Raquel's change; using brighter, natural light from the kitchen windows, the scene communicates a sense of happiness and plenitude, in contrast to the prior scenes. The communal space of the kitchen also removes Raquel from a more "private" or "hidden" space like her bedroom or a closet. What's more, the handheld camera quickly follows the characters here, often blurring the image, whereas in the previous scenes, the camera is more still—suggesting a prescribed "fixed" identity for Raquel. The moving camera suggests not only a more dynamic Raquel, but her relationships with others and ability to move between her own desires and different spaces. Raquel moves even further in the film's final shot: she leaves the house in athletic clothes to jog down the sidewalk, listening to music on a portable CD player, just as she saw Lucy do earlier. As a domestic worker, Raquel represents the inequalities that sustain the capitalist system which is being "sold" to her through her employer's model and society at large. Capitalism makes taste marketable, meaning that "there aren't any 'good' preferences. There are only preferences that are validated by others, differently, based on social contexts" (Cottom 2019, 57–58). Raquel's movement outside the market framework and the household through

her encounter with Lucy ultimately challenges this system.

Gift giving is also significant in *The Desert Bride*, as a demonstration of affection and friendship that introduces Teresa to other perspectives and relationships. After Teresa's bus breaks down on the way from her previous employers' home in Buenos Aires to that of her future employers in San Juan in northern Argentina, she has to wait in the small town of Vallecito for another one. While there she wanders through the market and agrees to try on a dress due to the insistence of a charismatic vendor, El Gringo (Claudio Rissi), yet she forgets her bag onboard his caravan as she rushes out due to an approaching storm. The following day Teresa finds El Gringo but her bag is nowhere to be found. Thinking that El Gringo may have unknowingly dropped it off along his route, they drive around the desert in his caravan looking for the bag. In this film, the capitalist system presents itself in Teresa's multiple offers to pay El Gringo for driving, yet he never accepts and instead generously shares his time and services. His nomadic perspective as a travelling salesman underscores a value that escapes capitalist logic. Following the first site where they look for the bag, Teresa walks back from the bushes where she relieved herself to receive a gift from El Gringo: a pair of pink sneakers. Again, Teresa offers to pay him for the shoes but he refuses, insisting that they are a gift. In this scene, as in the rest of the film, Teresa is the focus of the shot—El Gringo's back is to the camera and his outstretched arm frames Teresa at the center of the screen (Fig. 3, top). Her reaction—and the process and conditions leading to her desire of El Gringo—are the emphasis of the film, rather than the object of desire (usually another sexualized body) as is often highlighted by contemporary culture (Braidotti 2011, 288). Even though Teresa initially evades El Gringo and

his compliments, she desires these interactions that suggest someone else values her, evident in her laughter as they continue to drive. Equally, in *The Maid*, Raquel's laughter at Lucy sunbathing naked is indicative of her capacity to be affected by a new friend and the beginning of change. The shallow focus in this scene highlights Teresa's smile, drawing the spectator to her, while blurring El Gringo in the background (Fig. 3, bottom). The shoes are a symbol of Teresa's friendship with El Gringo, a reminder of this experience that she will take with her as she uses them to continue on her journey down the road. Teresa's change, like Raquel's, is evident through a gift she makes near the end of the film. For her, it is an offering at a roadside shrine for a local saint, La Difunta Correa, who is said to have nursed her son even after she died and is known for answering women's prayers for marriage. Previously skeptical, Teresa demonstrates through this act the transformative hope that she has acquired. She, too, gives to another as an act of genuine appreciation that is uncontained by capitalism, yet goes a step farther than Raquel by moving into the spiritual realm, beyond material relationships.

Gifts—whether material or immaterial—spark change in these women and are representative of an intimate encounter with another in a horizontal rather than vertical relationship that is key to realizing their desires. Raquel's jogging clothes and CD player along with Teresa's shoes remind them and the viewer of the value of the friendships that have allowed them to experience a world outside of employment where they may begin to act on their own desires. Buying, or consuming, for themselves is empty and leaves them unsatisfied. Rather, the consumption that really fulfills them is gift giving, imbued with affect and escaping capitalist definitions of value.

Desirability

Desire, an “expression of affectivity” (Braidotti 2012), exceeds capitalist values like the aforementioned gifts. Braidotti posits that desire is “a gift in some ways, but one that is disengaged from the political economy of exchanges regulated by lack and negativity” (2012, 158). By showing Raquel and Teresa as desirable and acting on their desires to be intimate with other people, the two films break with traditional representations that desexualize aging, domestic workers. Whereas both films address aging sexuality, especially noteworthy in an industry that often prefers to kill off older female characters rather than present them as sexually desiring and desirable, *The Desert Bride* develops its feminist take on female sexuality and desire further through Teresa's on-screen sexual pleasure, providing an example of the “compelling images of older women” that cinema often lacks (Chivers 2017, 73).⁶

As I've argued elsewhere, *The Maid* can be interpreted as a *Bildungsroman*, similar to the director's own description of his film as a fairy tale (Osborne 2020, 59–60; Silva 2010). Despite potential complicity with the employing family's infantilization of Raquel, this narrative structure reveals the devastating effects of employment on her psyche as she battles illness and isolation. Raquel's clothing (Winnie the Pooh pajamas and shapeless uniform), the *mise en scène* of her room (bed covered with stuffed animals), and her behavior (giggling at children's antics and her bashfulness around naked men) contrast with her attempts to appear more as a sexual, adult woman by putting on makeup and form-fitting clothes, letting her hair down, and flirting with Lucy's uncle. These actions and the numerous mirror shots of Raquel communicate her desire to be desirable. A middle-aged, working-class woman with darker features,

Fig. 3 *The Desert Bride* (Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, 2017)

Raquel has been seen by Chilean society and her employers as less than desirable yet through Lucy's self-confidence and comfort with her body, Raquel finds a model for desire of the self that rejects her employer's model based on consumerism.

Although Raquel does not follow through with a sexual encounter in *The Maid*, she is presented as sexually desirable. During her visit to Lucy's family's house, Lucy's uncle Eric (Luis Dubó) flirts with her, eventually leading to the bedroom. However, as their intimate encounter progresses, Raquel, undressed and uncomfortable, decides she can't go any further, mumbling about her lack of experience. Extremely vulnerable and scared in this scene, Raquel remains the focus, in contrast to Eric's back (Fig. 4). The audience is not privy to the reason but given Raquel's previous isolation and illness at work, she may still be working through seeing her body as desirable, or figuring out her own desires. This scene, nevertheless, adds to her transformation for a few reasons. First, she is no longer desexualized, as she had been at Pilar's house. Second, her visit to Lucy's home provides her with the necessary distance from her employers to realize she is not defined by her job. Lastly, she taps into some of her desires, even if she does not seem comfortable or ready to act on them. During the first half of the film, brief shots of Raquel's naked, adult body while bathing and changing clothes are juxtaposed with her careful arrangement of three teddy bears on her bed and with Lucy's later comfort with her own body as she sunbathes topless in the front yard, sings loudly in the shower, and goes for a jog with her portable CD player. This later scene with Eric further contrasts Raquel's mature body with her sexual inexperience and discomfort, alluding to the damage from years of employment and having "missed out

on an essential part of life with which [Pilar and Lucy] are familiar" (Ratner 2009, 63).

This may be the beginning of understanding what she desires in an intimate relationship with another adult. The unexplored aspects of Raquel's subjectivity, such as her sexuality, seem to suggest that she is in the process of learning her body, culminating in the final scene as she runs down the street. Just as change is essential to a *Bildungsroman* narrative, Raquel experiences transformation and growth, or an awakening (Ratner 2009, 63). Comparably, Kristyn Gorton cites Braidotti to explain that "one of the most potent metaphors of desire used within film and television is desire as an awakening, as a force or movement that draws the subject from her position and transforms her life" (2008, 1–2). Through the *Bildungsroman* structure, the film breaks with the traditional domestic labor relationship by depicting Raquel's self-awareness and growth independent of her maternalistic mistress (Osborne 2020, 59–60). Nevertheless, by following the *Bildungsroman*, or fairy tale, format and portraying Raquel as a stunted adult woman, *The Maid* falls short in fully developing Raquel's subjectivity, but rather provides moments of potential change.

The Desert Bride follows a similar structure as Teresa gradually changes and opens up to El Gringo. Before their first stop, El Gringo asks Teresa about herself and puts on music to try and lighten the mood. As she says nothing when he tries to guess where she is from, he remarks, "You haven't been on the road much," alluding to their different approaches to life. Uninterested, Teresa wryly responds, "I don't drink *mate* and don't talk much." Not drinking *mate*, an herbal drink popular in Argentina that is often shared with other people, equates to rejecting socialization and affection.

Fig. 4: *The Maid* (Sebastián Silva, 2009)

By the second stop, however, Teresa has begun to appear more comfortable with her companion. Although she's largely quiet during the film like Raquel in *The Maid*, she makes slight changes to her appearance as she sees herself as desirable to El Gringo. For instance, when she is alone at the second stop, she looks in the caravan's side mirror and lets her hair down, which he notices upon his return. This shot's shallow focus blurs El Gringo in the background, highlighting Teresa's gaze and image in the mirror. The mirror shots in both films suggest a desire and encounter of the self; at the same time, it is an encounter with the self-as-other, as seen by/through Lucy and El Gringo.

The Desert Bride, too, presents an aging domestic worker as a subject outside the domestic sphere who develops a sexual relationship with a man she has known briefly. Once Teresa discovers that El Gringo had hidden her bag in his caravan in order to prolong their time together, he offers to take her wherever she wants and the scene cuts to the two of them at a *boliche* sipping drinks and chatting. They drink, dance, and are sexually intimate in the bathroom off the dance floor. The scene in the bathroom decidedly departs from normative representations of feminine desire, of domestic workers, and of older women, as El Gringo pleasures Teresa in a public space, first kissing her face, then moving down her body until Teresa begins to gasp and her face fills with intense emotion as she approaches climax. After she first enters the bathroom alone and splashes water on her face, she remains at the center of the screen as we hear the door open and El Gringo enter off-screen. The camera continues to focus on Teresa and leave El Gringo outside of the frame, but this time it allows the viewer to witness an aging woman experience the epitome of sexual desire (Fig. 5).

This rather revolutionary scene depicts the transformation that Teresa has experienced throughout the film, from indifference and lack of emotion to the most profound expression of bodily pleasure and encounter with another.

Moving Desires

Desire, according to Braidotti (2011), is multifunctional and more than just eroticism or sexual longing. Viewing desire as including knowledge and becoming as well, she emphasizes connections, movement and mobility, fluidity, and processes rather than fixed identities, concepts rooted in reason and rationality, and oppositional thinking that has characterized traditional philosophy (2011, 257). Analogous to this interpretation of desire, the films resist closure through open endings, suggesting that there are numerous other possibilities for the protagonists' futures.⁷ Some scholars (Buttes 2014; Cardone 2013; Morales C. 2009) have interpreted the end of *The Maid* to suggest that Raquel remains stuck in the same damaging relationships and routines of employment, and are thus critical of the film's lack of more radical structural changes. Instead, like Vázquez (2014), I interpret Raquel's running down the street as indicative of possible transformation. Even if she does remain a live-in maid, she now recognizes the misfit between her desires and Pilar's, and understands the importance of life outside the household (2014, 175). Raquel's movement also marks a departure from rigid racial and class divisions and notions of femininity embodied by Pilar and her daughter. Instead, now, Raquel's subjectivity hints at desires beyond the bourgeois norms of family, gender, and class, and their corresponding divisions of space. A comparison of the soundscape and camerawork in the opening and final sequences illuminates this transformation: the film begins with

Fig.5: *The Desert Bride* (Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, 2017)

a shot of an empty kitchen while the family chats over dinner off-screen. Raquel then enters to sit down and eat dinner alone at the kitchen table, juxtaposing her silence with the off-screen chatter. She looks up from her plate to the camera, at which point the film's title comes on screen, identifying the protagonist (Fig. 6, top). By contrast, the film ends with Raquel jogging down the sidewalk with headphones on, no longer wearing her uniform (Fig. 6, bottom). Whereas the camera in the opening scene waits for Raquel to enter the kitchen, here the camera moves with Raquel. Notably, we hear the song "Ayayayay" by Chilean musician Pedropiedra (Pedro Subercaseaux) in a take that lasts a little over one minute. The fragment of the song looped in the film is the repetition of the Spanish interjection "ayayay," which often communicates emotions such as dismay or pain. The rest of the lyrics are removed from the clip, but the repetition of "te vas" ("you leave") in the original song aligns with Raquel's own movement away from the house and toward other possibilities in the future. This is perhaps the film's only extra-diegetic song; although Raquel turns on her CD player a couple of seconds before the song plays, it isn't clear whether it is the same song she listens to. Keeping her choice of music a mystery underscores her complexity, subjectivity, and independence, just beyond the viewer's (and the employers') purview. The change in soundscape further highlights Raquel's transformation and desires from the constant murmurs and demands of employers in the household to her personal rhythm; although alone, she no longer appears isolated or ill. Desire, as movement, is about imagining other possibilities, empowering Raquel.

Regardless, *The Maid* is markedly less radical than *The Desert Bride*. The films' titles themselves allude to their differences: *The Maid* remains tied to

Raquel's identity as a maid, reflected in the film's cinematography that relies largely on the confining space of the household, often reproducing the privileged class's perspective. Furthermore, the use of the handheld camera and ambient sounds along with references to the director's own personal experience with his family's domestic workers in the end credits and behind the scenes feature on the DVD creates a documentary-like feel that at times distances viewers from Raquel.⁸ *The Desert Bride*, on the other hand, encourages spectatorial identification with Teresa through extra-diegetic music and continuously framing her as the center of the narrative and the screen. As the title indicates, this road movie emphasizes subjectivity rather than identity through Teresa's personal quest outside the hierarchical power relationships and spaces of employment. Ultimately Teresa's final movements in *The Desert Bride*'s open ending suggest hope for the future and embody to a greater extent Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity.

The film comes full circle as Teresa walks down the desert road alone, similar to when she walked to town after her bus broke down or when she first looked for El Gringo. This time, however, she respectfully kneels to leave a bottle of water for La Difunta Correa as the sun rises in the background, symbolic of her transformation (Fig. 7). The film opens with an establishing shot of the desert as a line of indistinguishable people slowly makes their way down the long winding road. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Teresa as a woman walks up behind her to talk about the bus's cracked windshield. The woman asks her "Are you a believer?" to which Teresa simply replies "No," the first word she speaks. The woman continues to explain that the accident—a seagull flying into the bus's windshield—is La

Fig. 6 *The Maid* (Sebastián Silva, 2009)

Difunta's doing since seagulls don't live in the desert. Later, Teresa's lack of faith reappears in a conversation with El Gringo when she asks why he stops to pay respects to La Difunta. El Gringo explains that gradually he began to have faith because he saw the hope that she gave people. If in the opening scene Teresa appeared "lost" in the crowd and in the desert, in the final scene, she appears more assured of her place in this new landscape. Teresa's transformation allows her to see the value in her encounter with El Gringo, perhaps as a miracle from La Difunta, or as a reason to have hope.

Like Raquel's imitation of Lucy, Teresa starts to move more like El Gringo. Although both work where they live, El Gringo's love for movement and independence, symbolized by his profession, contrasts with Teresa's long-term employment with the same family in the same house. Yet at the end, Teresa's destination is not clear; the mountains are behind her, meaning it is possible that she is no longer headed to San Juan. The final on-screen conversation at the *boliche* uses a shot/reverse shot sequence, but only Teresa is in focus, keeping El Gringo out of focus when he speaks. He ends with a rhetorical question that is never verbally answered:

El Gringo: I don't think I could spend so much time in one place. I can't imagine it. In spirit, I mean.

Teresa: You never get tired of moving from place to place?

El Gringo: You don't get tired of staying still?

Teresa, however, does respond to El Gringo's question by leaving him, without saying goodbye, to continue on her own, proving that she has embraced a nomadic spirituality similar to his.

Reserved and somewhat passive at the beginning of the film, Teresa

eventually opens up to more, similar to the seemingly barren landscape. The recurring trope of birds throughout the film—the "lost" bird that hit the bus's windshield, a shot of empty bird houses in Vallecito and caged birds at the house in Buenos Aires—further communicates Teresa's transformation from feeling out of place, trapped, and/or homeless to embracing a nomadic perspective that gives her more freedom and hope. Looking at the camera before the final credits roll, Teresa "breaks" free from another cage—that of the camera, passing the fourth wall. Rather than being tied to the house where she spent more than half of her life, Teresa is now associated with the open place of the desert, an alternative space/time to what she has known. She also doesn't belong to a person, whether a partner or a mistress, and appears open to other, possible encounters.

Ending with movement—an embodiment of the desire to become—reaffirms Braidotti's idea that women's empowerment has more to do with the ability to become something beyond what is expected of them (or what society dictates) than "a specific model for their becoming" (2011, 133). The women's moving bodies illustrate their desire to connect with others, as a result of the transformative forces they have experienced through Lucy and El Gringo, as well as the possibility for other affective relationships in the future. Braidotti explains that "The disappearance of firm boundaries between self and other, in the love encounter, in intense friendship, in the spiritual experience, as in more everyday interpersonal connections, is the necessary premise to the enlargement of one's fields of perception and capacity to experience" (2012, 167). In these final scenes, the protagonists also break the fourth wall—another border—and directly engage with the audience through

Fig. 7: *The Desert Bride* (Valeria Pivato and Cecilia Atán, 2017)

their gazes, thereby challenging the long history of the male gaze in cinema. Looking at the camera, the protagonists confirm desire as movement towards others, as an individual and social experience, and

invite us to share the transformative pulse of desire with them. The women's gazes support the claim that feminine desire is not limited to sexuality or eroticism, nor is it defined in terms of lack, but is rather about the ongoing process of becoming.

1/ While Raquel's complexion is darker, Teresa, as a lighter-skinned domestic worker, may make viewers notice and question the racialization of domestic employment.

2/ For more on the "subjective turn," see Beatriz Sarlo's *Tiempo pasado: Cultura de la memoria y giro subjetivo. Una discusión* (2006).

3/ For more on the use of medicine to allow Raquel to continue working, see Mario Millones Espinosa's article "La Nana (2009): una sociología de los medicamentos y su relación con el trabajo en Chile" (2016).

4/ Original: "los sentimientos ambiguos de admiración y resentimiento que las empleadas domésticas suelen sentir hacia la figura omnipresente de la patrona" (my translation).

5/ Original: "simboliza el carácter inalienable de deseo de Lucy y Raquel, el fin de una forma de soledad" (my translation).

6/ Actress Paulina García (Teresa) previously appeared in the film *Gloria* (Sebastián Lelio, 2013), in which she similarly portrays a sexually desirable and desiring older woman.

7/ Gorton explains that desire "resists interpretation and any final closure" as it is in progress (2008, 1).

8/ Silva filmed *The Maid* at his family's home and, in the end credits, dedicates the film to the two maids from his childhood, one of whom was involved in the filming process documented on the DVD bonus material. The director has spoken about the relationship between the film and his own experiences in his family's house in a number of interviews. See, for instance, Silva 2009.

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How to reference Osborne, Elizabeth. 2020. "Desiring Domestic Workers in *The Maid* and *The Desert Bride*." *Comparative Cinema*, Vol. VIII, No. 15, pp. 41–59. DOI: 10.31009/cc.2020.v8.i15.04