

Film Review

- *Cada vez que muero* (*Every time I die*), directed by Raúl Vidales, Colombia, 2022

Cada vez que muero is a hybrid documentary film developed by Colombian director Raúl Vidales in close collaboration with seven women from Red Comunitaria Trans (RCT), a Colombian transfeminist collective founded in 2012. The film draws on both documentary and fictional narrative techniques to explore the shadow of death that relentlessly looms over the lives of transgender people in Colombia. Although it is not new that the LGBTQ+ collective is under threat, in the past few years the cases of harassment, violence, and homicides faced by queer people in the Latin American country have been on the rise. In particular, the number of transwomen being victims of hate crimes has increased alarmingly, something which has been largely ignored by both the authorities and the media. In such a hostile context, *Cada vez que muero* is the first feature-length film that foregrounds transgender bodies, voices, and experiences as a courageous testimony against a negligent government and obliterating society.

The film's director, Vidales, is a trained psychologist who forayed into cinema in the early 2010s. For almost a decade he has aimed to translate his social and political interests into the realm of filmmaking. The endeavour of making a film about trans lives began when he came across the participants of RCT. Although he entertained the idea of developing a project with and about them for some years, it only materialised during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking advantage of the enforced confinement and their difficulty to earn a living throughout this period, Vidales met twice a week with RCT members to discuss potential topics for a film. The outcome was a collaborative work in which the roles of these seven women in the production (e.g., as scriptwriter, art director, and costume designer) became as essential as that of the director. *Cada vez que muero* received its premiere at Bogotá's Ciclo Rosa 2021 and got exhibited in selected theatres across Colombia. Currently, the film is due to be screened at several festivals across and beyond the Latin American region.

During the weekly meetings, it became apparent that death was a central theme for the seven RCT women, Alexandra, Yoko, María Fernanda, Valeria,

Katalina, Daniela, and Sahory. These women's lives have been marked by the persistent lurking of death, the mourning of their murdered sisters, and the never-ending process of passing/rebirth that comes with transitioning. As suggested by its title, the film probes the paradoxical quest for the meaning of life by coming to terms with several manners of dying. Although excruciating, devastating, and frightening, the testimonies are at the same time relieving, restorative, and empowering. In *Cada vez que muero* the women represent a contemporary Latin American version of the folk legend of the phoenix, the immortal bird-like creature that rebirthed from the ashes. Although excruciating, devastating, and frightening, their testimonies are at the same time relieving, restorative, and empowering.

The documentary is structured around two interwoven storylines. On the one hand, it shows black-and-white footage of the weekly meetings that originated the film's argument. With medium and close-up shots, the camera invites the audience to participate in this intimate gathering. While drinking and smoking, the young and middle-aged protagonists write down and share their histories. They laugh and cry together as they recall their rather tough upbringings, the hurdles of expressing their gender identities, and the horrifying experiences of violence from relatives, men, and police forces. However, they also take the time to talk about their dreams, the joy of their alliance, and the countless opportunities to be reborn. Their informal and easy speech, even when telling grim stories, is as endearing as it is striking.

Intertwined with this footage, on the other hand, the film presents eight stand-alone visual tales. Some are fictional narrations inspired by their testimonies and others are recordings from trans celebrations/demonstrations in Bogotá. Unlike the scenes of the encounters, these sequences have vibrant colours, immersive music, and varied shooting locations. Mostly filmed in the neighbourhood where many of the protagonists live and work, the stories offer an aestheticized but stark depiction of their everyday experiences with death. In one of the tales, for instance, Alexandra and Valeria chase a man – apparently a member of the police – who has been threatening them with a knife. Wearing neon-coloured outfits with monstrous features, the women drag the man into a room where a bigger group awaits. Using rapid editing and extreme point-of-view shots, the film shows them furiously voguing to the tune of a heavy metal song that denounces the crimes committed against trans women. Later, in the most shocking sequence of the film, the group ultimately takes justice into their own hands by devouring the man.

Cada vez que muero is purposely provocative in its themes and forms. The provocation lies in the ability to smoothly alternate and connect disconcerting images with the intimate conversations of the protagonists. This counterpointing between violence and calm, struggle and hope, and death and life proposes a less reductive and more comprehensive portrait of transgender lives in Colombia. While the film may be formally rough at times, for example in the composition of some shots and the sound editing, the innovative blending of

filmmaking styles points out the importance of thinking about urgent queer issues as well as the most appropriate way to depict them. The contrast between monochromatic documentary and colourful dramatic images, the unapologetic graphic content, and the experimental roughness of the film echoes the shades in these women's lives. It is precisely this formal freedom that invites the spectator to get in touch with transgender experiences in an unprecedented manner. In this way, in a social context where transgender lives are persistently denied, *Cada vez que muero* allows Alexandra, Yoko, María Fernanda, Valeria, Katalina, Daniela, and Sahory to defeat death once again and be reborn – this time in the form of cinema.

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