**Militancy, feminism, and cinema: The case of Grupo Feminista Miércoles**

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**Abstract:**

This article contextualizes and characterizes the Venezuelan feminist film collective Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Founded by Venezuelan Josefina Acevedo and Italians Franca Donda and Ambretta Marrosu, among others, Grupo Feminista Miércoles (1979-1988) produced the documentary *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* (1981) and the videos *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo* (1987), *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* (1988), and *Una del montón* (1988), and participated in several activities organized by the Venezuelan women’s movement. On the one hand, this article pays attention to both the cinematic and political contexts that allowed the emergence of this collective, with a focus on the influence that Italian cinematic and feminist ideas had in these contexts. On the other hand, it also provides formal analysis of the collective’s filmography and explores how feminist ideas and praxis are deployed in its films. The overall aim of this article is to restore the contributions of Grupo Feminista Miércoles to both Latin American political cinema and transnational feminist cinema.

**Keywords:**

Grupo Feminista Miércoles

Franca Donda

Ambretta Marrosu

Feminist cinema

Women’s cinema

Venezuelan cinema

Latin American women filmmakers

Latin American political cinema

**Biography:**

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A few years ago, the Centre of Women’s Studies at the Venezuelan Central University tried to give the Josefa Camejo Order to Franca Donda as a recognition for her participation in the struggle for women’s rights in Venezuela. Born in Gorizia in 1933, Donda was a photographer, filmmaker, and activist involved in film and feminist collectives in Venezuela from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Donda refused the award coherently with her conviction that individuals should not be rewarded for work and effort that is done collectively.[[1]](#endnote-1) Understanding the politics behind this decision can shed light on the reasons why the historiography of Latin American cinema has overlooked the existence of feminist film collectives such as the Venezuelan Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Founded by Venezuelan Josefina Acevedo and Italians Franca Donda and Ambretta Marrosu, among others, Grupo Feminista Miércoles (1979-1988) produced the documentary *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* (‘I, you, Ismaelina’) (1981) and the videos *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo* (‘Argelia Laya, for example’) (1987), *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* (‘Eumelia Hernández, up and down the street’) (1988), and *Una del montón* (‘One of the bunch’) (1988), and participated in several activities organized by the Venezuelan women’s movement. However, its contributions to both Latin American political cinema and transnational feminist cinema continue to be briefly summarized or relegated to a footnote. This article attempts to amend this situation by contextualizing and characterizing this collective, locating its influences, and exploring how feminist ideas and praxis are deployed in its productions.

Insert Figure 1: Franca Donda, 1995. Photograph by Gerd Leufert. Venezuelan National Library Collection. Audio-visual Archive. Reproduction Abel Naim

Within the context of the 1960s radical film cultures and the possibility of formulating new cinemas, Latin America witnessed the emergence of new political cinemas that were named with different labels, including militant, third, and imperfect cinema, among others. The New Latin American Cinema became the umbrella term to refer to these political cinemas, which were committed to ‘artistic innovation and social transformation’ (Burton 1986: IX). Despite the fundamental role that the PrimeraMuestra de Cine Documental/First Documentary Cinema Festival in Latin America, celebrated in Mérida in 1968, played in the consolidation of the New Latin American Cinema, the literature about this film movement rarely acknowledges the contributions of Venezuelan filmmakers, let alone those of Venezuelan women filmmakers. The criteria that film scholars have used to establish the canon of the New Latin American Cinema and, more generally, Latin American political cinema, has taken an auteurist approach and has left out a number of films, filmmakers, and collectives that should be revisited and acknowledged (Rich 1997; Cavalcanti 2014; Seguí 2018; Cervera 2020). From the 1970s, an increasing number of women filmmakers and feminist film collectives reformulated political cinema by incorporating feminist practices, politics, and aesthetics. Among these collectives, Grupo Feminista Miércoles utilized cinema as a tool to document the struggles of Venezuelan women, to raise awareness about women’s issues, and to intervene in the political context. However, its existence and production have received very little attention by film scholars, with the exception of those who have made an endeavour to rescue Latin American women’s cinema (Kuhn & Radstone 1990; Schwartzman 1992; Azuaga 2003; Raydán 2010; Torres San Martín 2013).

This article revisits Grupo Feminista Miércoles, maps its influences, and explores its production. In order to do so, it primarily relies on semi-structured interviews and conversations with some of its members, their relatives and friends, and with feminist and film scholars. On the one hand, in order to address the history of the collective, I pay attention to both the cinematic and political contexts that allowed its emergence, with a focus on the influence that Italian cinematic and feminist ideas had in these contexts. Specifically, I maintain that traits of both Italian Neorealism and autonomous feminism can be observed in the work and ways of operating of Grupo Feminista Miércoles. On the other hand, this article also provides formal analysis of the collective’s filmography, and explores how feminist ideas and praxis are deployed in *Yo, tu, Ismaelina, Argelia Laya, por ejemplo*, *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo*, and *Una del montón*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Produced collectively by an all-female crew, *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* is a 35-minute film that explores issues surrounding womanhood, motherhood, and the relationship between production, reproduction, and oppression through the story of a woman potter who died after giving birth to her 24th child. Drawing from Kaja Silverman’s understanding of the disembodied voice and the relationship between photographs and death as theorized by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and Laura Mulvey, I argue that *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* makes use of sophisticated devices that point at the dissonance between women’s lives and feminist ideas. I also look at the three videos that Grupo Feminista Miércoles produced in the late 1980s. Despite the limitations on technical and formal aspects, I contend that these videos constitute an important archive of women’s struggles in Venezuela. *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo* (1987) and *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* (1988) are medium-length films that primarily contain testimonial interviews with women whose work contributed to shaping the Venezuelan political and feminist history of the twentieth century. *Una del montón* (1988) is a documentary that re-uses television footage to de-construct the media discourse around the case of Inés María Marcano in order to provide a feminist revision.

**The cinematic and feminist contexts in Venezuela and the Italian contingent**

# Three important contributions to the Venezuelan cinematic context—Margot Benacerraf, Primera Muestra de Cine Documental, and Cine Urgente­—created a space for the emergence of Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Firstly, Margot Benacerraf was one of the leading figures in Venezuelan cinema, the country’s first woman filmmaker, and also one of the first directors of documentaries in Latin America.[[3]](#endnote-3) During her short career as a filmmaker, Benacerraf directed *Reverón* (1952), a short documentary about the artist Armando Reverón, and *Araya* (1959), a poetic ethnography about traditional ways of extracting salt. This second film, which was also her last, won the prestigious FIPRESCI prize, shared with Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959. However, *Araya* did not premiere in Venezuela until 1977 and is only reluctantly considered part of Venezuelan cinema (Azuaga 2003: 295). Julianne Burton notes that ‘Araya’s historical place in the formative history of both Venezuelan national cinema and the New Latin American Cinema movement is still contested’ (2000: 51). I position *Araya* as a film that, on the one hand, opened the way for women to make films in Venezuela but, on the other hand, exemplifies the exclusion of women’s cinema from Latin American film history.

# Secondly, in September 1968, Mérida hosted the Primera Muestra de Cine Documental in Latin America, which is considered one of the three events—along with the Viña del Mar film festivals in 1967 and 1969—that consolidated the New Latin American Cinema (Pick 1993). This event also strengthened Venezuelan national cinema and validated the documentary as the preferred genre for a political cinema. Similar to the IV Mostra del Nuovo Cinema/IV New Cinema Festival in Pesaro, celebrated a few months earlier in Italy, it encouraged the making of new political cinemas and allowed establishing ‘synergies and dialogues with social and political movements in other latitudes’ (Ortega 2016: 356-357).[[4]](#endnote-4) Thus, political cinema continued to develop in Latin America in conversation not only with Latin American national film and political cultures but also with other countries outside the region.

# Thirdly, the film collective Cine Urgente (1968-1973), led by the couple formed by Jacobo Borges and Josefina Jordán, and Franca Donda, among others, was the first attempt to make a socially and politically committed cinema in Venezuela.[[5]](#endnote-5) Inspired by the manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969) by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Cine Urgente developed a filmmaking practice that was collective, worked in collaboration with film subjects, and used film as a trigger for discussions through screenings in working-class and other marginalized areas (Acosta 1997). Among Cine Urgente’s productions are the films *22 de Mayo* (1969), directed by Jacobo Borges, and *¡Sí Podemos!* (1972) and *María de la Cruz* (1974), directed by Franca Donda and Josefina Jordán. Although John King asserts that this collective was ‘an isolated initiative without any wider resonance’ (1990: 215), it led to the constitution of the first feminist film collective in Venezuela, Grupo Feminista Miércoles.

# If the 1960s are associated with struggles of liberation that inspired radical filmmakers to make a revolutionary political cinema, the 1970s witnessed how autonomous women’s movements questioned and contested the role of women in society and inspired women to make feminist films. In Venezuela, autonomous women’s movements gained strength in the late 1970s around the reform of the Civil Code, which gave equal rights and opportunities to women in 1982 (Espina and Rakowski 2002: 32).[[6]](#endnote-6) Members of this movement created or joined women’s collectives, including Persona, La Conjura, and Grupo Feminista Miércoles, among others, ‘to focus on women’s consciousness-raising through group discussion, journal publication, and video production’ (Friedman 2000: 164). Gioconda Espina notes that there was ‘a contingent of left-wing Italian women who founded feminism in Venezuela’ (2006: 21) during the 1970s, which included Franca Donda, Tecla Tofano, Giovanna Mérola, Viki Ferrara, Ambretta and Tamara Marrosu, Ornella Pelegrini, and Franca Polito. Among these women, Franca Donda and Ambretta Marrosu were important figures within both feminist movements and Venezuelan cinema.

# Before moving to Venezuela, Franca Donda (Gorizia 1933–2017) studied languages in London and Paris, and learned about photography and processing with Paul Strand. In 1957, Donda married Italian photographer Paolo Gasparini, with whom she had become involved in a photography club at the study of the brothers Aldo and Giuliano Mazzuco in Gorizia and in political circles close to the Italian Communist Party. Donda and Gasparini used to attend the Venice Film Festival, where their interest in Neorealism began. The Gasparini family was one of the many Italian families that immigrated to Venezuela during the ‘dopoguerra.’ Donda and Gasparini also lived in Cuba for four years during the early 1960s, and in 1968 they got divorced. It was then, Gasparini says, when Donda started getting involved in filmmaking collectives and feminist movements.[[7]](#endnote-7) Back in Venezuela in the late 1960s, she became part of the film collective Cine Urgente, as a founding member­—along with Argelia Laya, Josefina Jordán, and Tecla Tofano—of Mujeres Socialistas, and as one of the founders of Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Donda’s role in Venezuelan feminism was such that her biography is included in the book *20 Mujeres Venezolanas del siglo XX* (Dagnino 2019) and she has been referred to as the author of ‘the greatest visual testimony that exists about the women’s movement in Venezuela since the 1970s’ (Dagnino 2019: 157). However, she defined herself neither as a photographer nor as a filmmaker (Espina 2006). In the late 1980s, she moved back to Italy, but she continued to visit Venezuela to work in the processing of photographs, including those by Gasparini.

# Another Italian woman who was part of Grupo Feminista Miércoles and became instrumental in the formulation of Venezuelan film history was Ambretta Marrosu (Rome 1931– Caracas 2017). Marrosu met her first husband, Venezuelan Juvenal Herrera, at the Communist Festival for Youth, celebrated in East Berlin in 1951. Soon after, she moved to Venezuela, where she co-founded the film magazines *Cine al día* (1967-1983) and *Cine-Oja* (1984-2001), worked in film institutions such as the National Cinemateca, and wrote books and articles that have articulated the history of Venezuelan cinema from 1897 to 1980, including the book *Exploraciones en la historiografía del cine en Venezuela* (1985). Through these women, Italian ideas on feminism, politics, and cinema reached Venezuela, and were adapted and developed in conversation with national political and cinematic contexts.

Insert Figure 2: Members of the Venezuelan Feminist Movement at the Third Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in Brazil in 1985

**Grupo Feminista Miércoles**

Grupo Feminista Miércoles was launched publicly in March 1979 at the Venezuelan Square in Caracas during the reform of the Civil Code. Its members used to meet at Donda’s flat in Suapure Street every Wednesday, hence its name.[[8]](#endnote-8) The history of the collective can be divided into two periods. During the first period, the medium-length documentary, *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*, was produced. During the second period, new women, including Margalida Castro, Gioconda Espina, and Henriqueta Estrada, among others, joined. These women were not filmmakers, but feminist activists who worked on proposing legal reforms with political parties, unions, municipal groups, and even the parliament. During this period, they produced three videos: *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo*, *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo*, and *Una del montón*. The collective’s production was distributed through feminist and women’s networks in Venezuela and Latin America, including the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros*.[[9]](#endnote-9) Unlike other Latin American feminist film collectives, such as the Cine Mujer groups in Mexico and Colombia, none of the members of Grupo Feminista Miércoles had received a formal education in film and, for most of them, this was their first experience as filmmakers. Furthermore, Grupo Feminista Miércoles prioritized the political over the cinematic—hence its minimal concern about technical or formal aspects—and its films were always credited as directed by the collective. Apart from *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*, its productions responded to the urgency of creating an audio-visual archive of the feminist movement in Venezuela predominantly through filmic testimonies. In the book *Unfinished Transitions,* Elizabeth Friedman includes a statement of principles written in 1979 by the group, which defines the collective as autonomous and feminist, emphasizing that ‘the organization of women’s struggle does not divide the struggle of workers, peasants, and the proletariat in general, it strengthens it’ (2000: 165). The statement also said:

The movement for women’s liberation… should be an AUTONOMOUS movement, that is, should allow for women’s autonomy regarding their specific organization. The movement ought to be autonomous, and the women’s groups are tools of this struggle because they are a favorable environment where women can affirm themselves, understand themselves, speak freely, and build self-confidence; they allow the search for a new identity, leaving behind the constructed image in which women are imprisoned and oppressed; they facilitate the break with the traditional relations of subordination-domination, seduction, etc. which privileges *machismo* to the detriment of women; and the group allows the move from personal to collective consciousness, the same as the class consciousness of any oppressed group. (2000: 165)

The influence that both Italian cinema and feminism had on Grupo Feminista Miércoles can be observed in its Neorealist aesthetical and ethical traits and through the exploration of issues related to production, reproduction, and oppression, respectively. I refer to Neorealism not only as the national cinematic movement that emerged in Italy during the mid-1940s, but also as ‘a way of connecting with reality […], as a philosophical category, an aesthetic concept, and as an artistic school’ (León Frías 2013: 213). The study of the New Latin American Cinema has highlighted the links with Italian Neorealism via the foundational figures of this film movement who studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome in the early 1950s and later adapted some of its aspects to the reality of Latin America. However, B. Ruby Rich argues that the influence of Italian Neorealism in Latin America can also be observed through two other crossings. On the one hand, it can be observed in the themes and aesthetics of the Mexican film *Los Olvidados* (1950) by Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel, and the influence that this film had in Latin American cinema. On the other hand, there were Brazilian filmmakers who had learnt about and recognized the importance of Neorealist cinema, and used some of its strategies in their own filmmaking (1997: 274–275). Here I focus on what I contend was a fourth crossing, which reached Latin America through the work of the Italian photographers and filmmakers who moved to the region during the post-war era and established networks between Latin America and Italy. Thanks to these Italians, ideas and practices of Neorealism were translated, adapted, and re-interpreted in conversation with national spaces and cultures.

Although the situation of poverty and inequality in Venezuela was not due to the consequences of a war, but due to the historical processes of colonization, neo-colonization, and the increasing dependence on the oil industry, Grupo Feminista Miércoles shared the need to represent the human consequences of these historical processes. Using non-fiction formats, this collective made a cinema that, although focused on the situation of women, was socially and politically committed to expose and denounce oppression and poverty, represented the marginalized, and was concerned with bringing about social awareness, justice, and change. It showed the hardship of women’s everyday lives and mostly relied on simple and minimal cinematography and editing techniques, with no voice-over. However, unlike Italian Neorealism, the works produced by Grupo Feminista Miércoles cannot be defined by a unitary and coherent cinematic language. Instead, their aesthetic choices were conditioned and limited by the resources available, often scarce. This absence of formal innovation and technical quality needs to be read in political terms, that is to say, the lack of funding or support for women’s cinema obstructed the development of a feminist cinematic language in Venezuela.

Some continuities can also be seen between Italian autonomist feminism and Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Since the 1970s and inspired by both *Operaismo* (workerism) and autonomism, the Italian feminist movement focused on offering a revision of the class struggle from a feminist perspective.[[10]](#endnote-10) Italian autonomist organizations, such as Lotta Feminista, and feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici initiated a discussion that evolved into a transnational campaign—the International Wages for Housework Campaign—that attempted to redefine housework as a form of reproductive labour that creates value and demanded salaries for houseworkers. Years later, Venezuela became the only country in the world to recognize wages for housework in the Article 88 of the 1999 Constitution (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 136-139). Similar to Italian autonomist feminism, the Venezuelan feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s evolved from workers’ organizations into autonomous women’s organizations that still maintained the connection between class and gender, and focused on women’s roles in production and reproduction. As seen in Grupo Feminista Miércoles’ statement, Venezuelan feminism supported the struggles of workers and peasants, but believed in the need for women’s autonomous groups to exist and work through consciousness-raising to overcome women-specific forms of oppression. Despite the fact that all the members of Grupo Feminista Miércoles came from middle-class backgrounds, in its filmography, the collective always represented working-class women, not only as workers, but also as mothers.

Insert Figure 3: Members of Grupo Feminista Miércoles

***Yo, tu, Ismaelina***

The first film of Grupo Feminista Miércoles, *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*, was shot in 16 mm and is 35 minutes long. The idea for the film developed from the paper *La maternidad como instrumento ideológico,* written by the collective and presented during the FirstLatin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in Bogotá in 1981. Later, the collective made an audio-visual piece titled *Las mujeres de Lomas Bajas* (‘The women from Lomas Bajas’) and then the documentary *Yo, tu, Ismaelina.* This documentary was scripted collectively, funded by the Federal District’s Municipal Council, and received the Best Short-Film and Best Photography awards at the Municipal Awards of National Short Films in Caracas in 1981.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is concerned with the role of women as reproducers of labour and ideology in what Silvia Federici referred to as the subjugation of ‘women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force’ (2004: 12). Its brochure described the women’s stories in the documentary as an example of the ‘problems around family responsibility, domestic work and productive work, love and the transmission of ideology’ that affects women across classes. This film also reveals that the capacity of women to reproduce has conditioned their role in society and their bodies have become an asset that is controlled and regulated by outsiders, namely fathers, husbands, the Church, and the State. The prohibition of abortion is one of the most effective means of controlling women’s reproduction but, as *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* demonstrates, women’s bodies are controlled through other means too.

Specifically, the film raises issues about maternal mortality, women’s lack of control and understanding of their own bodies, and how motherhood reproduces patriarchal ideology through gendered forms of education and socialization. In one of the very few analyses on this film, Ricardo Azuaga describes it as a transition from the reconstruction ‘of events that happened around the death of Ismaelina’ (2003: 370) towards a ‘reflection about the social and labour situation of dispossessed and exploited women’ (p. 371). By using a personal experience of oppression and a theoretical feminist framework, the women in the film and the women who watch the film are invited to interrogate and resist aspects of their own oppression and to formulate the means to change it. Through a ‘correspondence between reality and theory, reflexion and practice’, as stated in the same brochure, the dissonance between women’s lives and feminist ideas is exposed. This dissonance is also mirrored aesthetically through different audio-visual devices, such as the use of non-synchronous voices and by mixing footage and photographs.

*Yo, tu, Ismaelina* begins with the opening credits rolling over a variety of shots of the mountainous landscape of Lomas Bajas, in the Venezuelan state of Táchira. This landscape, located near the border with Colombia, is significant because it distances women’s issues from urban areas and situates them in the rural and marginal. Formally, the film uses realist aesthetics, including what has been described in documentary studies as observational footage and interviews, but at the same time it draws attention to its own artificiality. After the opening scene, we see a sequence of still images of Ismaelina while she works making pottery. Then, five women are filmed one by one in a sort of photographic portrait, framed in mid/close-up shots, while they look at the camera and simulate stillness. The last of these women comes into view behind a clapperboard, then the camera zooms out, and she appears surrounded by numerous children. The observational footage unobtrusively captures the daily life of these women—harvesting clay, processing it into pottery, and selling that pottery in a local market—and favours the use of long takes often framed in a wide shot. Interviews are conducted with these women potters, Ismaelina’s husband, medical staff, and teachers. The interviews with medical staff address issues about family planning and contraceptive methods, and raise concerns about the lack of women’s sexual education and the restrictions that women face to obtain contraceptives. The interviews with teachers expose that the education of girls is regarded as less important by their mothers.

In most cases, these interviews are disembodied or unsynchronized. We often see the image of the person who is talking, but the sound that accompanies the image does not stem from the diegesis. In conventional observational documentaries, voices and bodies are synchronized to provide a sense of coherence and authenticity, but this is not the case in *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*. For Azuaga, ‘the almost absolute absence of synchronicity between image and sound’ (2003: 371) is likely due to being a low budget production, but this feature can suggest other things. In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman argues that the disembodied voice has a valuable function for feminist cinema because it liberates women from their bodies, which have been historically objectified by the male gaze. Thus, the disembodied voice can be a site for dissonance and dislocation which blurs the ‘distinction between diegetic interiority and exteriority and […] between spectator and spectacle’ (1988: 142). Drawing from Silverman, I read the disembodied voice in *Yo, tu, Ismaelina* as both a formal disruption and a liberated representation of women’s subjectivities. On the one hand, by representing disembodied voices and unsynchronized bodies, the film echoes the collective approach of its mode of production. This approach attempted to contest the role of the auteur and the centrality of the director. Instead, it deployed collective and collaborative cinematic practices that have the potential to depatriarchalize the ways of making cinema. On the other hand, the dissonance between image and sound complicates the positioning of women on screen. They appear in their roles as artisans and mothers, as producers and reproducers. However, what we hear differs from what we see. We listen to women’s voices blaming Ismaelina for working too much and for refusing to take contraceptives, but we see images of poverty and absence. Through this dissonance, the film unveils how women internalize and reproduce the same patriarchal discourses that oppress them, and points at the need for consciousness-raising.

Visually, the film is also unsettling thanks to the use of photographs. The still images are almost exclusively dedicated to Ismaelina. We see a series of images of her making pottery, in apparent motion yet frozen in time. These photographs were taken by Franca Donda before the death of Ismaelina. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes that ‘ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death’ (2004: 21), thus, photographs become a trace of something or someone who existed and departed. The relationship between photographs and death was also addressed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* [*La Chambre Claire*, 1980], pointing that there is a ‘terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead’ (p. 60) and emphasizing how photography’s unique relation to its referent authenticates an existent moment which cannot be repeated. Laura Mulvey argues that ‘the photographic index reaches out towards the uncanny as an effect of confusion between living and dead’ (2006: 31). The confusion of that distinction, she explains, becomes ‘objects of human fear and fascination’ (p. 38).

Throughout this documentary, still images of Ismaelina appear in haunting moments. At times, Ismaelina wears a blue-checkered dress and a white turban that covers her hair and highlights her dark skin. At times, the photographs are in black and white. In most of these still images, she is working with her hands, shaping clay into pottery. Although photographs, the blurring effect obtained by the gyratory movement of the wheel offers a sense of motion, thus of life, which blurs ‘the boundary between life and death’ (Mulvey 2006: 11) and gives a sense of animating the inanimate. The photographs of Ismaelina are recordings of both ‘absence and presence simultaneously’ (Barthes 1980: 57). She is no longer part of the historical world in which the film was made. Her voice is never heard. Only her returning image, frozen in time, is seen. Nevertheless, her trace persists into the present, becoming the subject matter of the filmic narrative. Thus, Ismaelina’s haunting presence in these images serves the purpose of visualizing the terrible consequences of women’s oppression. Besides the numerous photographs of Ismaelina, other photographs also appear in the film, framed and hanging on walls. These portraits appear to be spectators within the film, looking at the diegesis from within. By blurring the boundary between spectator and spectacle, these photographs, like the cinematic apparatus, are witnessing the process through which women not only talk about their experiences but, by publicly sharing their own stories, also build grounds for reflection and change. Like the title indicates, Ismaelina stands for all women who suffer and even die because of the subjugation of their bodies to the reproduction of the workforce and patriarchy.

Insert Figure 4: Frame from *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*

***Argelia Laya, por ejemplo*; *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo*; and *Una del montón***

In the late 1980s, Grupo Feminista Miércoles produced three videos, *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo*, *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo*, and *Una del montón*. These videos primarily contain testimonial interviews with women who, for different reasons, were contributors to the fight against contemporary women’s struggles. According to Venezuelan feminist Gioconda Espina, the urgency in recording these testimonies responded to the need of creating ‘an audio-visual archive of the feminist movement in Venezuela’,[[12]](#endnote-12) which meant that they were produced in even more precarious conditions than *Yo, tu, Ismaelina*, were self-funded, and did not pay much attention to technical or formal aspects. *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo* and *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* were produced in a similar manner. Some members of Grupo Feminista Miércoles and the subjects of these videos—Argelia Laya and Eumelia Hernández—gathered in a house together over a day or two to record interviews about their life-stories. *Una del montón* is formally more complex as it reuses footage from different television programs to deconstruct the media discourse around the case of Inés María Marcano in order to provide a feminist perspective.

Argelia Laya (1926-1997) was one of the most recognized women of the twentieth century in Venezuela. She was of Afro-Venezuelan heritage, a member of the Communist Party, a *guerrillera* known as Comandante Jacinta, a co-founder of the Movement for Socialism, and a women’s rights activist.[[13]](#endnote-13) Throughout her life, she campaigned for several women’s causes, from women’s suffrage to the decriminalization of abortion, and co-founded a number of women’s organizations. *Argelia Laya, por ejemplo* is a 44-minute video which contains footage recorded during three interviews conducted by Grupo Feminista Miércoles with Laya over a weekend in 1987. Laya is mostly framed in close-ups, but the camera often zooms in and out, revealing the members of Grupo Feminista Miércoles who were part of the production. She talks about her life-story: her relationship with her mother, her upbringing and political awakening, the child that she had after having been raped, her ‘attitude of rebellion against injustice’ and the need ‘to cultivate love’, grieving the loss of her mother while she was part of the communist guerrilla, and her commitment to women’s rights, among other issues.

Similarly, *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* includes an interview with Eumelia Hernández that addresses both her militancy and her personal life. Eumelia Hernández (1913-1990) was also a working-class woman who became a women’s rights and union activist. She was a long-standing member of the Communist Party, vice-president of the Unitary Central of Workers, and a founder of the Feminine Cultural Association. *Eumelia Hernández, calle arriba, calle abajo* is a 30-minute video solely composed of different fragments of an interview with her at the age of 75. On the one hand, she provides an account of the emergence of unions and political and women’s organizations beginning in 1936 in Venezuela as well as a description of some of the political events that took place since then. On the other hand, she addresses personal issues, such as the difficulties of balancing militancy and marriage, as well as her failures and successes in motherhood. Aesthetically, the look of this video is very similar to the previous one. The camera mostly frames a close-up shot of her and zooms in and out, revealing the members of the Hernández family and the film crew. Despite the technical and formal limitations, the importance of these videos lies on the valuable testimonies of their subjects who provide personal accounts on the still overlooked history of women’s struggles. Today, they constitute an important archive of the women’s movement in Venezuela.

*Una del montón* is a 30-minute documentary about the case of Inés María Marcano. Marcano was a textile worker in her early twenties who lived with her two young children in a zinc-roofed shack in the shantytown ofNueva Tacagua, located on the hills surrounding Caracas. One night, she left her children locked inside the house while she went to visit her mother nearby. Two men broke into the house, kidnapped the two-year-old daughter, raped, and killed her. Even though these two men were convicted and imprisoned, Marcano was also detained on the charge of child abandonment. Her case reached several feminist organizations that initiated a public campaign to release Marcano from prison, arguing against the abandonment charges due to Marcano’s personal circumstances—she was a poor single mother living in a dangerous area with no state protection or services. Eventually, the CONG—a platform on feminist NGO’s and organizations formed in 1985—coordinated the campaign and organized press conferences, gained audiences with both the Attorney General and the president of Congress, and collected signatures. An interview with Marcano recorded in prison was aired on television and had an important effect on public opinion. Shortly after, a Superior Court judge released Marcano on 23 December 1987.

As a result of this case, Grupo Feminista Miércoles produced the report ‘A Woman and the Common Struggle: In the Case of Inés María Marcano, Una en un millón’and the documentary *Una del montón*.[[14]](#endnote-14)The documentary includes footage of the judicial process, interviews with lawyers, Marcano’s neighbours, feminist activists, and television debates from the different television programmes of Venezuelan Channel 8 that covered the case, as well as the interview recorded in prison with Marcano and photographs taken by Franca Donda during the campaign. The formal approach of this documentary is very different from the previous ones. *Una del montón* exposes how the media and society criminalized a mother who was absent from the crime scene rather than the men who perpetrated the crime. The video relies on the possibilities of montage to give meaning to a story, deconstruct a discourse, and offer a reinterpretation by juxtaposing the existent material in a different way. By reusing the same materials that had been constructed to criminalize Marcano, Grupo Feminista Miércoles articulated a new discourse that became a powerful feminist reformulation.

Insert Figure 5: Frame from *Una del montón*

**Conclusion**

The 1960s political cinemas developed in conversation with the social and political movements that were taken place in different parts of the world. Through the circuit of international film festivals and other events, radical filmmakers were able to learn from cinematic ideas and praxis developed elsewhere, which at times were adapted or reinterpreted in negotiation with national and local contexts. This exchange contributed to the creation of distinctive cinemas that linked national identities and struggles with transnational film movements and approaches. As I have demonstrated, there were several links between Neorealism and autonomist feminism and the work of Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Inspired by the ethics, aesthetics, and production practices of Italian Neorealism and its Latin American interpretations and informed by contemporary feminist ideas, this collective made non-fiction films that exposed women’s oppression and brought about social justice and change. It was a cinema that focused on the gendered struggles of the working class and represented forms of oppression related to reproduction and motherhood that had been previously ignored.

Feminist cinema was one of the political cinemas that had also emerged during the 1960s in different parts of the world. Despite the rejection of realist aesthetics by 1970s feminist film theory, many Latin American feminist films of the 1970s and 1980s relied on realist aesthetics as a way to convey feminist ideas more effectively to their intended audiences. In this regard, Grupo Feminista Miércoles was not as interested in formal experimentation and technical perfection as it was with disrupting the status quo and contributing to social change. This does not mean that its films were naïve or unsophisticated, but that overall, its production primarily responded to the urgent need for supporting the 1980s feminist movement in Venezuela with audio-visual media. Thus, despite the difficulties and limitations –technical, financial, and otherwise– the filmography of Grupo Feminista Miércoles constitutes an important audio-visual archive. However, the precarious conditions in which its films were digitalised and the lack of funding for this kind of archives pose a real threat to the conservation of the collective’ legacy.

Something that Grupo Feminista Miércoles shared with other feminist film collectives was the need to disrupt the role of the auteur and the centrality of the director. It consistently showed a radical commitment to collective cinematic practices by, for instance, refusing to credit individual directors. Its ways of operating attempted to avoid repeating the same modes of production and authorship that had pushed women out of filmmaking and, by doing so, tried to depatriarchalize the ways of making cinema. When Donda declined an award for her participation in Venezuelan women’s struggles, she was acting coherently with the idea that achievements should not be attributed to individuals, but need to be acknowledged as collective efforts. For a long time, the historiography of Latin American political cinema continued to praise the figure of the individual director over the collective practices foregrounded by feminist filmmakers and others, invisibilising the work of Grupo Feminista Miércoles. Thus this article provides a long overdue restoration of this collective’s contribution to Latin American cinema, women’s history, and transnational feminist cinema.

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**Notes**

1. The Josefa Camejo Order was established by the Centre of Women’s Studies at the Central University of Venezuela in 1995 to recognize the contribution of individuals and institutions to women’s rights and human rights and their efforts to build a fairer and more equal society. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ambretta Marrosu pointed at how important-yet-difficult it is to watch Venezuelan films, particularly because copies often disappeared or could not be located (1988: 21). This was nearly the case for Grupo Feminista Miércoles. In 2006, the Centre of Women’s Studies produced a DVD in honour of Franca Donda with all the films and videos that she worked on, including those produced by Cine Urgente and Grupo Feminista Miércoles. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Margot Benacerraf studied film at IDHEC in Paris in the early 1950s. Although she began her career as a documentary filmmaker, throughout her life, she has mostly worked in film institutions such as the National Cinemateca, which opened its doors in 1966 with her as its first director. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original (Spanish) are mine. For reasons of space, original texts in Italian or any other language cannot be published. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. # Prior to Cine Urgente, Jacobo Borges, Josefina Jordán, and Franca Donda had participated in *Imagen de Caracas* (1968), a vast multi-screen and multi-media exhibition that commemorated the 400th anniversary of the foundation of Caracas.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. # Among these women’s movements were Movimiento para la Liberación de la Mujer, formed in 1969, Mujeres Socialistas (which was part of the political party Movimiento al Socialismo), and Liga de Mujeres, both formed in 1972.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gasparini 12 July 2020 telephone interview. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. # Grupo Feminista Miércoles was originally formed by Josefina Acevedo, Cristina Aragona, Mauxi Banchs, Carmen Luisa Cisneros, Franca Donda, Katina Fantini, María Pilar García, Miryam González Blanco, Ambretta Marrosu, Tamara Marrosu, Cathy Rakowsky, Christa Sponsel, Ana Mundarain, and Vicky Estévez.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. # One of the events that played a crucial role in the development of feminist and women’s organizations not only in Venezuela but also across Latin America was the UN World Conference on Women, hosted in Mexico City in 1975. In addition, since 1981, the UN has supported the organization of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *encuentros*—an original idea of La Conjura—which continues to take place in the region every two or three years. These *encuentros* have generated a space where women from different countries and backgrounds discuss women’s oppression and other issues, and launch transnational initiatives and campaigns. Furthermore, through these *encuentros*, cultural productions such as the films made by feminist film collectives are distributed, exhibited, and discussed.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Both *operaismo* and autonomism emerged in Italy through the work of Marxist theorists such as Antonio Negri during the 1960s. *Operaismo* is a political theory and a movement that focuses on the working class and developed within trade unions and left-wing political parties. Autonomism developed from *Operaismo* and is a set of political theories that promoted self-organization and confronted hierarchical structures in institutions, trade unions, and social movements. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Josefina Acevedo and Franca Donda were directors of photography and camera operators. The sound was done by Carmen Luisa Cisneros. The editing was done by Josefina Acevedo, Franca Donda, Carmen Luisa Cisneros, and Ambretta Marrosu. According to the credits, many other women were also involved in the production. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Espina 3 July 2020 telephone interview. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Movement for Socialism is a Venezuelan political party founded in 1971 by a group of people who left the Venezuelan Communist Party, including Pompeyo Márquez, Teodoro Petkoff, and Argelia Laya, among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This document was co-written with members of AVESA and CESAP, and had an introduction written by Argelia Laya. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)