



Pausas | Pauses

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"Pausas" is a videographic compilation that draws on seven contemporary Latin American films featuring women protagonists who undertake paid domestic or cleaning work. It collects and juxtaposes sequences in which these employees snatch breaks from their labours. "Pausas" thus discovers and discloses a repeated trope that compellingly figures the possibilities for interiority and psychic freedom enjoyed or engaged in by these workers.





Creators' Statement

“Pausas” [“Pauses”] is a videographic compilation that draws on seven contemporary Latin American films featuring women protagonists who undertake paid domestic or cleaning work. It collects and juxtaposes a set of sequences from the films in which these employees snatch ambivalent breaks from their labours. “Pausas” thus discovers and discloses a repeated trope, one that compellingly figures, in a variety of cinematic ways, the possibilities for interiority and psychic freedom enjoyed or engaged in by these workers.

The ideas explored in “Pausas” extend on previous research into a wave of Latin American fiction films featuring live-in domestic worker protagonists that have been released since around 2000, for example Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* (Mexico, 2018), Anna Muylaert’s *Que horas ela volta?* (Brazil, 2015) and Sebastián Silva’s *La nana* (Chile, 2009), among others (see Randall 2024). These works have been identified as a new “thematic genre” of Latin American cinema by Deborah Shaw (2017, 124), and they have been criticised as instances of “cine clasemediero” (or middle-class cinema) by Maria Mercedes Vázquez Vázquez (2019, 162–203), due to the privileged class provenances of their directors, who have often been inspired to portray domestic worker protagonists by their own affective ties to the domestic employees who helped raise them as children.

“Pausas” explores seven feature-length fiction films from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico that were released between 2001 and 2018. *Cama adentro* [Live-In Maid] (Jorge Gaggero, Argentina, 2004), *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, Mexico, 2018) and *Que horas ela volta?* [The Second Mother] (Anna Muylaert, Brazil, 2015) focus on live-in domestic worker protagonists, while *Domésticas—O Filme* [Maids] (Fernando Meirelles and Nando Olival, Brazil, 2001) depicts the intersecting trajectories of multiple domestic

employees in São Paulo. *Réimon* (Rodrigo Moreno, Argentina, 2014) explores the experiences of an hourly-paid cleaner who commutes across Buenos Aires. In *La camarista* [*The Chambermaid*] (Lila Avilés, Mexico, 2018), the camera follows in the footsteps of a hotel cleaner inside the Intercontinental Presidente hotel in Mexico City. Finally, the protagonist of *Alanis* (Anahí Berneri, Argentina, 2017) is a sex worker (and former live-in domestic worker) who undertakes hourly-paid cleaning during the film's diegesis; she is also repeatedly shown caring for her 18-month-old son. These films explore different kinds of reproductive and affective labour (domestic work, cleaning, childcare, sex work, breastfeeding), so this video essay also contributes to an exploration of the kinds of links that are frequently being made between these types of gendered work in contemporary Latin American films.

In “Pausas,” we employ videographic criticism to shed light on an understudied visual and atmospheric trope that resonates across these films: domestic and cleaning workers' snatched breaks or ambivalent moments of rest. The protagonists are shown pausing, often to look out of a window, up towards the sunlight, or across the horizon—generally while they are at work, or when travelling towards and away from work. The scenes explored in “Pausas” may not immediately appear crucial to the films' narrative development, which has contributed to the lack of attention paid to their importance in written scholarship on the topic. While these sequences are characterised by a lack of dialogue, they are visually and affectively arresting, and the use of split screens sheds new light on the resonances between them.

These sequences are significant because they are used in these films to evoke a sense of the protagonists' interiority. Their significant length and affective power are indicative of the filmmakers' desire to demonstrate a sense of solidarity, and sympathy, with these workers—including an urge to see them rest or experience a (fleeting) moment of freedom from gruelling daily routines. Their lack of dialogue contributes to the sense that the likely positionalities of both the films' directors—and many of their spectators—mean that they can only allude to—or guess at—the protagonists' thoughts and feelings during these moments. The music that plays throughout most of the video essay, Debussy's “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” (1894), can be heard in *Réimon*. It constitutes the sonorous motif of the film's domestic worker protagonist, Ramona, and is used to connote both her interior world and her elegance. Ramona lives in a working-class neighbourhood and is shown watching what sounds like a popular telenovela at home, while she also shows a strong preference for classical music. The film thus breaks down perceived barriers between “high” and “low” culture, staging what Julia Kratje has termed “un arte de igualdad” (an aesthetics of equality) (2018, 168). Ramona's snatched moments of musical respite enable the film to reflect on who

has the privilege of leisure time (Kratje 2018). Indeed, the final pauses shown, in *Que horas ela volta?* and *La camarista*, are taken as their protagonists “trespass” into upper-class spaces of luxury and leisure reserved for their employer-families or for guests.

“Pausas” also marks the passage of one working day through the sequencing of the clips it comprises and, while these clips focus on brief breaks, they constitute ambivalent moments of peacefulness. These are breaks in which protagonists are still shown caring for, or alongside, their employers’ children, or when they are worrying about their relationships to their own biological children (for example, in *Domésticas*). These pauses are also taken during the workers’ commutes towards and away from employers’ homes—often on public transport. Although this travel time could be seen as a period that falls outside of the working day, the lengthy, tiring, costly, even dangerous nature of the journeys that domestic workers undertake in Latin America have been identified as an element of their labour that is not sufficiently appreciated or recompensed and that compounds their social exclusion (Ferrero and Gordillo 2008; Montoya-Robledo and Escovar-Álvarez 2020).

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Biographies

Rachel Randall is Reader in Latin American studies at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). Her research interests encompass Latin American cultural studies, with a focus on film and comparative approaches. Her most recent book, *Paid to Care: Domestic Workers in Contemporary Latin American Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2024) examines the depiction of paid domestic workers in post-dictatorship Latin American cultural production. Rachel is also author of *Children on the Threshold in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Lexington Books, 2017) and co-editor of *New Visions of Adolescence in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Catherine Grant is Honorary Professor at Aarhus Universitet, Denmark, and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Reading, UK. Formerly, she was Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She carries out her film and moving image studies research mostly in the form of remix-based video essays. She also runs the Film Studies for Free social media platforms, and for more than a decade she was a founding co-editor of the award-winning peer-reviewed journal *[in] Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*. In 2020, Grant was elected a member of the Film, Media and Visual Studies section of Academia Europaea in recognition of her research contribution to the field.

Reviewed by Tiago de Luca, University of Warwick

This is an elegant and poetic video essay that unearths a recurrent, if underexplored, trope across the contemporary Latin American cinema of domestic work: the moment when women who undertake paid domestic work are shown deep in reverie. The decision not to use a voiceover commentary and explanatory captions was a wise one. “Pausas” lets the images speak for themselves, while sequential editing and split screens gently direct the viewer to spot resonances and connections in terms of how this trope has been depicted. Characters often look up to the sky or stare out of windows—a contemplative gesture that, in three of the films explored, is followed by horizontal and/or vertical pans whose measured movement seems to project these women’s inner thoughts on to the outside world. Debussy’s “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” (1894), heard throughout the video essay, adds pathos and poignancy to the themes explored.

In her seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey argued that the presence of women in classical Hollywood cinema tends to “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.” The scenes explored in “Pausas,” all of which centre on women, also freeze the flow of action. As the makers explain, these scenes “may not immediately appear crucial to the films’ narrative development,” a fact that is compounded by their extended duration and lack of dialogue. Here, however,

they emerge as moments of thoughtful rather than erotic contemplation, and as part of a subjectivising rather than objectifying operation through which, to cite the makers again, “the possibilities for interiority and psychic freedom enjoyed or engaged in by these workers” are asserted.

Yet, as much as these pauses relate to questions of character depth, they also raise issues of film form, especially in relation to ideas of time. The centrality of time is highlighted in the video essay via its chronological structure, which is meant to evoke the passing of a working day, as well as through its revealing bookending quotes. Whereas Marx’s conceptualisation of labour, which opens the video essay, is gendered as male, Mary Collier’s closing words, from her poem “The Woman’s Labour” (1739), illuminates the female reproductive work that is often rendered invisible. Questions of labour time, and its gendered implications, are not unrelated to cinematic time. Mary Ann Doane (2002: 160) has shown that the dominant formulation of narrative time in the cinema, which relies on principles of efficiency and the excision of so-called “dead time—time in which nothing happens, time which is in some sense ‘wasted,’ expended without product,” emerges in tandem with capitalism’s accelerated rationalisation and usurpation of time. Thanks to Ivone Margulies’s eponymous book (1996) on Chantal Akerman and her *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), “nothing happens,” as a cinematic idiom, invokes in its turn the rendition of female domestic labour, suggesting that, even in cinema, the “labour time” of domestic work often equals non-productive, “dead time.”

In light of these considerations, we may pause over how these pauses are materialised in the films and the different meanings and resonances they may assume depending on the films’ narrative and formal economies. In *Alanis* (2017), *Cama adentro* (2004) and *Que horas ela volta?* (2015), the pauses, however fleeting, do offer a moment of respite for the narrative, whether because of an otherwise cramped, claustrophobic mise-en-scène (*Alanis*), or because of the more conventional storytelling mechanisms “at work”—or doing the work for us as viewers—in the two other films. In *Roma* (2018), *Réimon* (2014), and *La camarista* (2018), conversely, these pauses do not so much stand out as they are more aligned with these films’ governing aesthetic principles, including, at different moments in the narratives, a sustained focus on physical labour via wordless long takes. In such films, these pauses also emerge as powerful moments, perhaps even more so, yet not so much because they break an otherwise tightly constructed narrative flow, but because the formal depiction of labour time is itself a constitutive, sometimes relentless, feature of these films. Then there is *Domésticas* (2001), where quick-paced editing, erratic aerial shots, and sped-up footage ensure that the character’s pause is not experienced as one by the spectator. In its adherence to music-video tropes and advertising techniques, *Domésticas* is symptomatic of a late-capitalist regime of

visuality predicated on sensory overload and speed, thus betraying a palpable anxiety over vacant, unfettered time.

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Reviewed by Nicolas Poppe, Middlebury College

Pulling on threads from Rachel Randall's *Paid to Care: Domestic Workers in Contemporary Latin American Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2024), Randall and Catherine Grant's excellent work of videographic criticism challenges us to reflect upon moments of respite snatched by women employed as domestic workers in seven feature films. These *pausas* recall similar moments that so many of us have witnessed or experienced in our everyday lives, something Randall and Grant foreground through the use of the epigraphs that bookend "Pausas | Pauses". Universalized through passages from Karl Marx's "The Working Day" (1867) and Mary Collier's "The Woman's Labour" (1739), these individual women steal moments for themselves because their time has been stolen by structural social and economic factors that lie far beyond their control. Enmeshed within specific cultural contexts, these experiences transcend the Argentine, Brazilian, and Mexican films that represent them. They say so much, by (generally, but not always) saying nothing at all. Somewhat paradoxically, what makes these breaks so meaningful is their inaccessibility.

"Pausas | Pauses" does things that *Paid to Care* cannot. Through the use of (digitized) moving image and sound, Randall and Grant tap into the poetical potential of these snatched moments in such a way that resonates far more strongly than the written word. Decidedly quotidian, these pauses break us out of spectacle in the films. In this compilation, we are compelled to endure these moments. They are not experienced, however, as boring (at least not for me). Rather, we escape into the characters' interior worlds, even though they are unknowable. This is done through the successful use of various videographic techniques. Juxtaposing films representing distinct cultural contexts, split screen at once universalizes and particularizes respite. Similarly, its audio mixing meshes films in ways that force us to listen to and (if we are lucky) hear multiple realities at once. One especially powerful moment of "Pausas | Pauses" occurs in an extended juxtaposition of *Réimon* (dir. Rodrigo Moreno, 2014) and *Roma* (dir.

Alfonso Cuarón, 2018). Brought together in their soundtrack—*Roma*’s diegetic sound is underscored by a CD of Claude Debussy’s “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” (1894) in *Réimon*—the entangled sequences provide so many layers of meaning. I do not yet fully know what to make of these synchronized sequences, especially their tracking shots, but the particularities of these cinematic representations of late-capitalism in Latin America remain, and the broader everydayness of characters’ experiences as women employed as domestic workers endure.

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