



Is it necessary to be a feminist to make feminist cinema? Iciar Bollain and her cinematographic representation of gender

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Abstract. Inequality between men and women in cinema has remained stable from its very start. Both behind the cameras and on-screen representation, women have been systematically made invisible, are underrepresented and have been objectified. The feminist efforts which arose in the '70s to draw attention to and challenge the existing power order worked through two axes: the critique of patriarchal society and a patriarchal cinema industry; and the development of feminist counter-cinema. Despite their efforts, women's situation has not greatly improved. However, from the '90s a stream of female authors has emerged who are considered feminists by the critics, but who disown feminism themselves. Their films, with strong capable women in lead, no longer represent women's struggles but assume their victories and create from them. New categories of analysis, such as *post-feminist* cinema, have been developed for these films. Nevertheless, I question whether these are not essentially feminist representations inasmuch as they are building alternative models of femininity. If they are, does this mean that a feminist consciousness is not necessary to make feminist films? In order to address this question, I analyze gender representation in Bollain's filmography, and discuss whether her films can be considered feminist despite her rejection to this term, and the implication this might entail.

Key words: Feminist film theory; Counter-cinema; Post-feminist cinema; Postmodernism; Iciar Bollain.

[es] ¿Hay que ser feminista para hacer cine feminista? Iciar Bollain y su representación cinematográfica del género.

Resumen: La desigualdad entre hombres y mujeres en el cine ha estado presente desde sus inicios. Tanto detrás de las cámaras como en su representación cinematográfica, las mujeres han sido sistemáticamente invisibilizadas, menospreciadas y cosificadas. Los esfuerzos feministas surgidos en los 70 para visibilizar y subvertir el orden de poder existente se centraron en dos ejes principales: la crítica al patriarcado y a la industria cinematográfica patriarcal, y la creación de contra-cine feminista. A pesar de sus esfuerzos, la situación de la mujer no ha mejorado sustancialmente. Sin embargo, desde los años 90 se ha extendido una corriente de directoras que, siendo consideradas feministas por la crítica, reniegan del feminismo. Sus películas, protagonizadas por mujeres fuertes y capaces, ya no representan las luchas de las mujeres sino que asumen las victorias de éstas y crean a partir de ellas. Nuevas categorías de análisis como la de *cine post-feminista* han surgido para referirse a ellas. Sin embargo, ¿no pueden considerarse estas representaciones como esencialmente feministas al construir modelos alternativos de feminidad? Si la respuesta es sí, ¿quiere esto decir que una conciencia feminista no es necesaria para hacer películas feministas? Para contestar esta pregunta en el presente artículo realizo un análisis de la representación de género en la filmografía de Iciar Bollain, buscando descubrir si sus películas pueden considerarse feministas a pesar de su rechazo al término, y las implicaciones que esto podría tener.

Palabras Clave: Teoría feminista del cine; Contra-cine; Cine post-feminista; Postmodernismo; Iciar Bollain.

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“We do not accept the existing power structure and we are committed to changing it, by the content and the structure of our images and by the ways we relate to each other in our work and with our audience”

Womanifesto
(Feminists in the Media, 1975)

1. Introduction

The so-called *seventh art* has arrived to its first century of history. The reality of the filmed image has radically changed since the first Cinematograph Lumière appeared. But women’s situation in cinema does not seem to have changed in the same way. Both behind the cameras and on-screen representation, women have been systematically made invisible and are underrepresented; and they have been objectified and portrayed as passive.

To counteract this situation, in the ‘70s a number of feminists approaches arose around film production and film reviews. They struggled to draw attention to and challenge the existing power order. Despite these movements’ efforts, women’s situation has not greatly improved. National and transnational studies have shown that women still represent a very small percentage of the industry. Moreover, when they are represented in films, these representations are still based on stereotypes, clichés and mythology, with women as objects rather than as subjects. This has had a relevant impact on the naturalization and normalization of gender hierarchies, especially if we take into account that cinema has been claimed to be a (re)productive device of social imaginaries, including the patriarchy.

In this context, the important Spanish filmmaker Iciar Bollain has disowned feminism and vindicated herself only as a *director* (without ideology or gender). These statements have attracted much attention and received a lot of criticisms. Her films have been interpreted as feminist, but she has repeatedly denied it. Why? I explain how neoliberal mechanisms and logics have created new identities defined by the rules of the market, and how the fear of exclusion in a competitive and complex industry like the cinema has played a role in authors adopting this position, for Bollain is not the only one: a stream of female authors who do not feel the need to define themselves as feminists has emerged since the ‘90s. They argue that the feminist movement has been surpassed and it is obsolete. Some theorist have begun to talk of *post-feminism* as a new category for these movies that no longer represent women’s struggles but assume their victories and create from them. In this article I question whether these are not essentially feminist representations inasmuch as they are building alternative models of femininity: strong and active, not dependent, not as patient subjects but as agents. Moreover, if they can be considered feminist representations, does this mean that a feminist consciousness is not necessary to make feminist films? In order to address this question I analyze gender representation in Bollain’s filmography, and discuss whether her films fit in any feminist category, and the implication this might entail.

As Teresa de Lauretis asked before “who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom [?]” (de Lauretis, 1985).

2. The importance of representation: *what* and *how*. Feminist Film Theory

The hegemonic cinema distribution has tended towards the masculine and masculinized representation of the world and the society. This has had a relevant impact on the naturalization and normalization of gender hierarchies, especially if we take into account that it has been claimed that the cinema is a (re)productive device of social imaginaries, including patriarchy (Cabrera Campoy, 2016). That is to say, that an uncritical (re)production of the patriarchal framework in films helps to perpetuate and maintain the “system of social organization in which the key positions of power—political, economic, religious and military—are found exclusively or predominantly in the hands of men” [translated from Spanish] (Puleo, 2015).

That is why, almost from the beginning of the cinema history, there have been films demanding equality between men and women or, at least, highlighting the existing inequality.² Some female authors managed to bypass the hegemonic rules, but often remaining in the limits of the industry and with a mainly propagandistic role. The rise of these productions in the ‘70s coincided with the emergence of postmodern ideologies and third wave feminism. Casetti identifies three elements that led to the consolidation of a feminist perspective in cinema: 1) women’s movements that give rise to “elements such as the marginality of the feminine role, the existence of a repressed creativity, the difference between the said and the lived”; 2) the proliferation of independent films outside mainstream industry; and 3) the analysis of representation and perception, “the ways in which a discourse imposes its conception of the world and assigns a place to who produces it and to who receives it” [translated from Spanish] (Casetti, 1994: 251).

As for feminist theory itself, cinematographic feminism soon moved from the iconographic criticism (based on a *natural* binary male-female) to the film analysis of *gender* as a social construct (Stam, 2001). It delved into the *generic* conception of image not only as a representation of reality but also as something involved in its construction by establishing a dialogue with the viewer through processes of *projection-identification* and *affective participation* that distort the viewer’s look (Morin, 2001). The idea that “the analysis [of the film] had to focus not only on the image but also on the iconographic and narrative operations that placed women in subordinate positions” [translated from Spanish] (Stam, 2001: 205) appears. The reduction of women to fixed and immutable stereotypes—infantilized, demonic, sexually objectified—places them in the world of myth, outside the story, at once marginalized and glorified. Their symbolic representations deploy them as an object and not as an active subject in the film (Casetti 1994).

This affects the female spectator. If cinema interrelates three *views* (camera / author, characters and the viewer) (Stam, 2001), the viewer’s point of view systematically merges with those of the male director and the male character. Men carry the action, they make things happen. Women are passive subjects to be looked at or on which to act. This differentiated presence makes the viewer (male or female) always identify himself/herself with the male hero and see the woman as an object of enjoyment (Casetti 1994). Moreover, the consequences of the projective nature of cinema

² An example of this is Alice Guy’s short film “*Les résultats du féminisme*” from 1906 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_MO-LgdE7hE). Alice Guy is considered the first professional women filmmaker in the world (Stam, 2001).

are not reduced to the projection room. Cinema is a special device for the (re)construction of social imaginaries in postmodern societies. It participates of the complex power structure that establishes and determines the specific schemes of thinking, reading and building the reality in each society —the so-called *social imaginaries* by Pintos de Cea (1999; 2005)— which in the end configure what is considered to be the reality of that society (Cabrera Campoy, 2016). That is to say, this uneven appearance and perception of men and women translates from films to real life and contributes to perpetuating and maintaining the patriarchal system.

Taking all this into account cinematographic feminism developed two main axes, as they appeared in the *Womanifest* of 1975 (*Feminists in the Media*, 1975). On the one hand, the analysis and critique of patriarchy and the patriarchal cinema industry; on the other, the creation of feminist counter-cinema to denaturalize dominant discourses and show the contradictions of what hegemonic cinema presents as obvious. However, do the two axes need to go hand in hand? Moreover, is a feminist consciousness necessary to make a film that fits in counter-cinema and which gets to its objectives?

Before answering that question, through the analysis of Iciar Bollain's case, it is interesting and in fact essential to find out whether there have been changes in women's status in the film industry since the advent of feminist critical theories in the '70s: changes that could justify the feeling of detachment from previous feminist claims. Sadly, neither in the international nor in the Spanish national context reality seems to have changed much. The results of the study *Gender Bias Without Borders* (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2014) highlighted this worldwide inequality. The female characters with lines of dialogue are less than 1/3 of the total; the female labor force in the movies is less than 25% and in higher end jobs drastically decreases (5-10%); power is represented in all spheres (political, business, financial, academic) by men, women's participation being between 10-30%. In addition, the study notes that the objectified representation of women far from disappearing has been perpetuated and that it has maintained its sexualization. In addition, the same study considers the importance of "who is creating, green lighting, and distributing cinematic content" (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2014: 5) and notes that only 20.5% of filmmakers are female. Analyzing this number further, only 7% of directors are women, 19.7% of writers and 22.7% of producers (Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2014).

The situation in Spain is not better. When looking behind the scenes or focusing on the stories, men and male viewpoints are still hegemonic (Aguilar, 2010). Thus, of the total number of directors only 13% are women, and of the producers, writers and filmmakers less than 20%. In addition, there is a double discrimination in the industry: vertical (the greater responsibility and recognition, the fewer women) and horizontal (segregation of men and women working areas equivalent to traditional male and female roles) (Arranz, 2008).

Considering the above, it cannot be stated that equality between men and women has reached the Spanish (or the worldwide) film industry. Moreover, the three elements identified by Casetti that caused the critical feminist theory to appear remain alive: feminist movements still demand equality and recognition of women's lives and creativity all over the world³; the independent film industry is now more devel-

³ Even more, during the last decade feminist movements have arguably regained strength in Western societies. As examples, see the huge demonstrations organised in Spain and Poland to stop regressive laws intending to restrict the right of abortion; the enormous reaction of women against the new policies of the US president; or the organization of a women's worldwide strike on the 8th March this year.

oped than ever with the democratization of recording devices and the era of internet; and theories about the importance of representation and perception have been recognized within the academic community.

3. Is a woman's look a feminist look? The case of Icíar Bollaín

Despite that, important Spanish women filmmakers such as Icíar Bollaín are opposed to considering themselves feminists. From within the industry, Bollaín says she makes films with a *women's view* and a women's perspective, but not with a feminist (nor even feminine) standpoint because she does not seek to vindicate anything but rather simply show another point of view. Specifically, the viewpoint of a white European woman (Bollaín, 2003). She is not the only one, but one of the many female directors included in the '90s so-called "*women's cinema*" that have rejected that label and disowned feminism, considering it an obsolete ideology. They seem not to have any need to define themselves as *feminists* because they consider that the vindications of this political movement have been surpassed and that there is, on a practical level, effective equality between men and women in the film industry (Martínez-Carazo, 2002).

Feminist criticism has reacted against these arguments. However, one also needs to consider the context in which these discourses rejecting *feminism* emerged, because they are not exclusive to female film directors. As Catherine Rottenberg (2014) has theorized, there is a growing stream of women disowning second-wave feminist principles based on the idea that legal and political equality has already been achieved and, thus, the remnants of inequality need to be face in individual terms. As she argues, under the current western neoliberal rationality a new "neoliberal feminist subject" has been created in recent decades. One that is "distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women [...] [but] disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality" (Rottenberg, 2014: 420). This neoliberal approach has corrupted and absorbed some traditional feminist ideas, displacing their content and replacing it with capitalistic entrepreneurial values of *resource optimization*, *personal initiative*, *innovation* and *success*. Inequality is, in this sense, measured only by the gap between male and female institutional presence in power positions and would only disappear when women themselves decide to take those positions — other feminist claims such as *fair treatment* or *full integration in the public sphere* are no longer recognised. With an inherently individualistic approach, this new feminist subject assumes that the feminist revolution has already taken place and that now is time for women to act in consequence and break the *internal barriers* that are restraining them from achieving positions of power. With feminist success equated to individual particular woman's successes in entrepreneurial capitalistic terms, the possible existing differences are no longer due to systemic discrimination but to the lack of individual's effort or to their mistakes. In this sense, there is no longer room to think about collective action, and "the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualized terms" (Rottenberg, 2014: 422).

Despite her rejection to the feminist label, Bollaín's discourse fits surprisingly well in this new "feminist neoliberal" framework. On the one hand, she denies systemic discrimination or inequality between men and women in the cinematographic industry. On the other, she works individually to reduce residuary inequality by achieving personal success in the labour market. Moreover, as Martínez-Carazo

points out, Bollaín has “a desire to articulate her visual discourse from the centre, to achieve broad reception and to ensure commercial success” [translated from Spanish] (Martínez-Carazo, 2002: 86). Three elements that can relate to the “feminist neoliberal” path to women’s successful careers that would eventually end inequality: to *internalize the revolution*, to *lean in* her career, and (finally) to close *the ambition gap*.⁴ That is to say that by being brave Bollaín broke her internal barriers and decided to direct her own movies within the mainstream industry; and by doing it with success she was promoting equality because she simultaneously closed (a bit) the men-women power gap and started to be a reference for other female directors.⁵

I am aware that, due to her explicit rejection to the term *feminism*, placing her within this “neoliberal feminist” framework can be seen as controversial. Nonetheless, two things are worth considering. First, the context in which her rejection to feminism started: in the ’90s the new (neoliberal) feminist identity did not yet exist as such, so there were no references to this type of discourse being placed under the term *feminism*; in addition, classifying herself as *feminist* would have surely affected the possibilities of production and reception of her films, going against the above stated goals. In this sense, rejecting being identified with previous feminist film theorists can be understood as simply trying to *survive* within the cinematographic mainstream industry to which she wants to belong. Second, I uphold that the “neoliberal feminist subject” is inherently contradictory. By following the neoliberal rationality it promotes the individualization of depoliticized subjects, ignores structural inequalities and fosters market rationality. It co-opts and distorts feminist claims, occupying the *feminist* public arena with discourses that fit into and perpetuate the current institutional ideological framework; thus neutralizing other feminists’ criticisms to the neoliberal, capitalistic, and patriarchal systems. Moreover, it places responsibility of inequality on women rather than on a dominative structure of power. Considering all that, the “neoliberal feminist subject” holds a discourse that can be considered as non-feminist despite their self-classification as feminists.

Taking the above into consideration, by placing Bollaín’s discourse on the “neoliberal feminist” framework I am not mistaken her statements or taking from her the agency to reject feminism. On the contrary, I am acknowledging that her discourse is not unique, but part of a wider *neoliberal* thinking pattern that is growing.

Another element supporting this idea is Bollaín’s apparent contradiction when she seeks both gender invisibility for the filmmaker —asking the viewer not to take it into account— and the existence of different viewpoints in the story generated by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or nationality (Bollaín, 2003). As Zecchi has noted:

“All the parafilmic efforts of the [Spanish] female directors [...] have the aim of inserting their discourse in the hegemonic system, thus denying the sexual subalternity of their experience; [while] their films [...] are shaped [...] from the experience of the difference” [translated from Spanish] (Zecchi, 2004: 338).

However, from a neoliberal logic this is not necessarily a contradiction. The content and the particularities of the films, *shaped from the experience of the difference*,

⁴ Concepts from Sheryl Sandberg’s book *Lean in*, analyzed by Catherine Rottenberg in her article “The rise of neoliberal Feminism” in relation to the emergence of the new “neoliberal feminist subject” (Rottenberg, 2014).

⁵ Her recent interview “No solo faltan directoras. Faltan mujeres en toda la profesión” (Bollaín, 2017) is a clear example of this discourse.

can be understood as a vindication of an individualized identity that deserves to be recognized within a general *agendered* framework of the film industry. In this sense, when Bollaín admits the current gender inequality of the cinema industry, framing it as the lack of “female presence among people who decide what is done and who does it” [translated from Spanish] (Bollaín, 2017), she does not acknowledge the vertical discrimination accounted for before. On the contrary, she understands gender inequality as “a matter of diversity” that can be solved by convincing women to *lean in* the ruling positions; something that should be done not for *social justice* but because “we need more thematic variety” [translated from Spanish] (Bollaín, 2017) in films.

This claim for *diversity* in Bollaín’s and other female directors’ statements has been analysed as fitting in the cultural pattern of postmodernism, which is shaped by the ideas of “plurality (racial, cultural, aesthetic, ideological) and tolerance (vital stances marked by its inclusive character that blur the lines of transgression)” [translated from Spanish] (Martínez-Carazo, 2002: 79), as opposed to fixed monolithic ideologies —including feminism. However, postmodernism understood that way has also been theorized as promoting depoliticized individualistic identities that can only serve the neoliberal capitalist interests of money (Zizek, 2008).

In this sense, feminist criticisms have reacted both in general and in cinematographic contexts against these neoliberal arguments that seem to deny the historical memory of the struggle of women (Cruz, 2006). They accuse these women directors of talking from a comfortable bourgeois position, of not committing but instead accommodating themselves as much as possible within the industry. They accuse them of benefiting from their exceptional position as women who enjoy male privileges and perpetuating the idea that equality is real, when (as we have seen) it is not. But at the same time, feminist critics analyze the content of their films as feminists inasmuch as they fit into the counter-cinema mentioned above.⁶

4. Analysis of gender representation in Bollaín’s films

Thus, while feminist critics have claimed that her films *are* feminist themselves Bollaín upholds they (maybe) have a feminine viewpoint but surely not a feminist one. As I am about to explain, Bollaín’s films are characterized by women in starring roles and by reversing the unwritten rule that posits that men take action and women are subject to such action. Notwithstanding, contrary to what happened in previous feminist counter-cinema, action in Bollaín films does not focus on the feminist struggle — this has already been overcome and won. Rather, her characters are women living in today’s society without noticing the constraints that this poses. They are empowered women, Bollaín says, not because of feminist discourses, but outside of them. In this sense, can Bollaín’s movies be considered as feminists?

I analyze three of her films to see whether they fit within the borders of counter-cinema as defined in the Womanifesto of 1975. That is to say, if they show and denaturalize what hegemonic cinema presents as obvious. In order to cover as far as possible the course of her career I have chosen the following films: *Hola, ¿estás sola?* [*Hi, are you alone?*] (1995), her first film; *Te doy mis ojos* [*Take my eyes*]

⁶ In fact, these film analysis were prior to Bollaín’s statements. Her rejection of feminism was a response to these reviews, considering that the critics were unfairly typecasting her under a label she did not recognize.

(2003), the most successful one; and *Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo* [*Kathmandu, a mirror in the sky*] (2011), one of her latest works.⁷ Through this analysis I aim to uncover the gendered discourses held in her representation of women. To do so, I focus my analysis in her portrayal of the following categories: the main characters and their activity / passivity; the relations between women; the sex-affective relationships and the family structures; and the characters' sexuality. In this sense, my analysis is situated within the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (see for example Van Dijk, 2015 or Fairclough, 1995), particularly within the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (see for example Lazar, 2007).

In all three films mentioned above the main characters are women. Bollaín reflects the importance of the main role in her essay “*El cine no es inocente*” [*Cinema is not innocent*] and highlights the relevance of the existence of female main characters — she also remarks the importance of not being questioned for representing feminine main characters in the movies (Bollaín, 2003). Her female characters are the ones that take the course of action in the film, they take decisions and guide the viewers. The three main women in *Hola, ¿estás sola?* and *Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo* decide autonomously about their lives and, only then, they communicate those decisions to the men with whom they live. They do not wait for their approval or permission at any point. Trini and La Niña will travel *to get rich*, with the existence of the father and the boyfriend of La Niña being more anecdotal than problematic. Laia wants to become a teacher and to stay in Nepal. All her actions are aimed at achieving that: she marries only for convenience and strives to be the ownership of her project, not giving any authority to her husband. In fact, all three women expect the corresponding men to follow them, but the passivity they find or the conflict of interests is what leads to the couples splitting. In *Te doy mis ojos* the representation of this activity / will is quite a bit more complex, because it is a film about violence against women in which Pilar, the wife, is completely subjected to Antonio, her husband. However, the film starts with Pilar running away from home in slippers in the middle of the night, and from that action the film shows how she is able to slowly empower herself and make autonomous decisions — working, studying art, putting limits on Antonio, etc. In fact, only when she eventually decides to act does the violence end.

Another significant aspect is how relationships between women are established. The main tendency in cinema is that female characters do not relate with one another or that they relate only in reference to men (Aguilar, 2010). Bollaín's films do not follow this pattern: women build strong and lasting friendships that are portrayed as *eternal*. Instead of showing loving relationships as stable, she gives this characteristic to friendships. The squabbles between Trini and La Niña do not lead to splitting, they are just another way to communicate. Their friendship goes so far that they share everything, even the guy they like — rather than fighting for him. Pilar has the unconditional support of her sister and her new friends, whom she has just met. The *sorority* they build is reflected from the beginning in their conversations during meals and it culminates in the moment they accompany Pilar to get her things

⁷ Relevant characters in the movies that I will analyze:

- *Hola ¿estás sola?*: Trini, La Niña, La Niña's mother, La Niña's father, the Russian man.
- *Te doy mis ojos*: Pilar, Antonio (Pilar's husband), Ana (Pilar's sister), Pilar's mother.
- *Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo*: Laia, Sharmila, Tsering (Laia's husband).

from the house, facing Antonio (at the end of the film). Finally, Laia and Sharmila share concerns, desires and fears despite the cultural difference. They learn and take refuge in one another, simultaneously building a school and an indissoluble link that has more importance than her relationship with Tsering. Family is just one topic in their communication, but their union is based on their professional concerns and the school project.

Sex/affective relationships and family structures, meanwhile, appear always linked to violence. In *Hola ¿estás sola?* and *Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo* they are completely denaturalized: they are neither a priority for the main characters nor places of refuge and security, but rather the opposite. Trini has been raised in orphanages and never knew her mother. La Niña's mother abandoned her, and her relationship with her father is somewhat violent (she gets a slap in the first scene of the film). Laia agrees to marry Tsering out of convenience in order to stay in Nepal, but the Nepalese family structures (especially those of Sharmila and of the school children) feel quite oppressive. These are not areas of support or understanding, but they are instead for imposing outdated racist, classist and sexist mores. Sharmila recognizes this, but at the same time she says she has no other place to go. Family *is* violence, but outside it there is nothing. Regarding *Te doy mis ojos*, violence is present not only in Pilar's marriage, but also in the relationship of her parents. Despite that, her mother keeps encouraging her to reconcile with Antonio, although she knows he could kill her. The counterpoint is marked by her sister, who maintains a healthy relationship with an Irish man. But Pilar reproaches Ana's decision to leave the family house—a fact that has allowed Ana to meet her husband—and that he represents a barrier between them.

The only aspect in which Bollaín does not transgress the unwritten rules of the hegemonic cinema is that all their characters are heterosexual, and all love relationships are monogamous. The apparent exception of the love triangle between Trini, La Niña and the Russian man is quickly denied when the bond between La Niña and the Russian man is consolidated. However, sexual freedom is represented in her films as normal. The women decide whether to have sex, where and with whom. La Niña has no problem in leaving her lover behind, and when they meet the Russian man they are the ones who take the initiative to *fuck with him*. He lets them but is not proactive at any time. In *Te doy mis ojos* loyalty emerges as a theme linked to the jealousy of Antonio and his lack of confidence. This is discussed in the therapy sessions and it is projected as violence on Pilar when he asks her if her intention is to fuck with others. She had never thought of doing so, but her group of friends assumes that she is having an affair (it would be possible and accepted). In addition, Pilar's friends talk in the restaurant about their different lifestyles and their desires; they are the ones who decide on their relationships. Finally, in *Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo* Laia sets out clear limits to Tsering from the beginning. He is not sure about those (*what if we like each other?*) but he respects them. When these limits are broken it is she who takes the initiative and decides to start a sex-affective relationship.

From this analysis Bollaín's films have to be considered part of the counter-cinema, although they do not oppose patriarchy explicitly. How are they, then, counter-cinema? By creating new referents of femininity that denaturalize the traditional cinematographic view of women as passive objects. From the '90s, a new (post)feminist representation of women appeared in the western cultural arena: the portrayals of second-wave feminists' *daughters* who had always lived in a *liberated* (even

post-patriarchal) world. They challenged previous feminist traditions for considering them oppressive, and they reoccupied the public space with different imaginaries of women. Instead of focusing on the second-wave feminist struggles and demands, they portray women's who live in the victories of those movements without being aware of it (Chicharro Merayo, 2013). Bollaín's films fit in that (post)feminist cinema category. Margaret Andrew (cited in Martínez-Carazo, 2002) defines post-feminist films as those in which:

“[1] the main characters [...] take the feminist conquests for granted, [...] [2] they themselves emphasize the reverse of those conquests [...] and [3] they rely on autonomy [...] both in their relations with the opposite sex as in their friendship, presupposing an equilibrium in a society in which power appears dissociated from the gender” [translated from Spanish] (Martínez-Carazo, 2002: 88).

Bollaín's films completely follow these rules. [1] *The main characters take the feminist conquests for granted* in all three films. Trini and La Niña enjoy freedom to do whatever they want and the story shows that La Niña's mother had the choice to stay or not with her family. Ana is the embodiment of these conquests: safe, strong, with a healthy relationship, does not condone violence, etc. Socially, nobody questions Pilar and everybody helps her. Furthermore, the process of Pilar's empowerment in the film can be identified with her process of immersion, understanding and acceptance of these feminist conquests. Laia, meanwhile, is a completely autonomous and independent woman, with clear goals both professionally and personally. She is horrified by the Nepalese violent patriarchal structures, which means they are alien to her. [2] *They themselves emphasize the reverse of those conquests*. The freedom of choice of La Niña's mother has another side: the abandonment and breaking of emotional ties. In the case of Pilar, the answer is violence, fear and misunderstanding. When she decides to set herself free from Antonio, he responds by hitting and humiliating her, and by attacking her self-esteem. This gender violence can be understood as a simile of patriarchal society, punishing the women who struggle to break free. Laia, meanwhile, ends up alone. She has achieved her objectives and has remained faithful to them, but in exchange she has found solitude. [3] *They rely on autonomy [...] both in their relations with the opposite sex as in their friendship*". This sense of autonomy has been displayed and exemplified as discussed in the relationships between women and the sex-affective relationships.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of Bollaín's work leads me to consider that her films do not respond to the hegemonic rules of commercial cinema, but rather they help in building new discourses on women and gender relations. They fit with what has been called *post-feminist cinema* as they build an egalitarian discourse not through the fierce struggle but through the naturalization of the existence of strong, active, capable women. However, in this sense and according to the 1975 Womanifest's claims, Bollaín has to also be considered a feminist director. She generates new cinematographic references that break with the passivity of women as objects and with which the viewer may have a

projection-identification. She represents and helps to (re)construct a reality in which women are agents, not passive recipients of action.

Her attempts to extract herself from the feminist cinema seem, to be directed to her interest in reaching a wider audience and not put limits on her films in terms of reception, following a neoliberal logic. In this sense, her discourse around gender inequality is similar to the one held by the new “neoliberal feminism”, for which structural barriers for women have already disappeared and nowadays inequality is due to women’s internal barriers that keep them in a subordinated position.

The criticisms she has received are directed to this fact rather than to the content of her films. They accuse her of going against the women’s liberation movement and of denying the existence of a systemic dominant structure. Bollaín calls what she expresses on her cinematographic view *gender peculiarities*, but can’t these actually be understood as violent experiences derived from the patriarchy?

Thus, the parafilmic efforts of Bollaín to separate her films from the feminist cinema can be considered as an attack on feminist discourses; while her films fit both in the counter-cinema and in the post-feminist cinema. I would not want to belittle the negative impact that the public rejection of feminism by famous people like Bollaín can have; particularly in the current context where Women’s Rights are facing new systematic attacks in Spain and worldwide. Unfortunately, it was beyond the scope of this article to develop such a critic. On the contrary, I have explored the limits between the director’s identity, aim, ideology and awareness, and the final product she creates.

After the case study of Bollaín’s filmography, it seems that the answer to the question posed in the title is that a feminist conscience is not strictly necessary for the creation of counter-cinema. From a self-declared non-feminist position Bollaín creates new referents of femininity and escape from the uncritical reproduction of the patriarchal system, fulfilling the requirements of feminist counter-cinema. The contradiction is not new: if we recognize that not everything said by a woman necessarily reflects a feminist viewpoint, why not accept that the discourse of a self-declared non-feminist woman can be feminist?

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