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Lo-Fi Femme: The Messy Hypermediacy of Aspirational Femininity in Melisa Liebenthal's *Las lindas* (2016)

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Abstract: This article merges discursive-based scholarship with a phenomenological approach to analyze the media convergence in Melisa Liebenthal's *Las lindas* (2016), a personal documentary which explores thresholds of femininity through liminal life stages of girlhood, adolescence, and womanhood. Lo-fi aesthetics and post-production techniques reduce the primacy of the visual logic of feminine allure, highlighting the physical exchange of media and heightening audience awareness of cultural practices that reinforce standards of femininity. The film thus filters the reality of femininity in such a way as to make it unsteady, incomplete, and never quite in focus, forestalling any notion of its completion or attainability.

Key Words: Intermediality; Documentary; Femininity; Hypermediacy; Lo-fi; Melisa Liebenthal

Lo-Fi Femme: The Messy Hypermediacy of Aspirational Femininity in Melisa Liebenthal's *Las lindas* (2016)

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Written and directed by the then twenty-four-year-old Melisa Liebenthal, the autobiographical documentary *Las lindas* (Argentina, 2016) questions the social exigencies of trying to grow up feminine.¹ Misgendered for the tone of her voice, for the shortness of her hair, and for the presumed masculinity of her clothing, Liebenthal raises questions about the imposition of feminine conformity, which is underpinned by a self-effacing and self-imposed desire to satisfy a masculine gaze. Why must women smile in photos and shun body hair? Can a woman still be beautiful even if she is not photogenic? What makes a woman desirable? These questions are all particularized, each interrogated from a first-person perspective communicated in regular voice-over commentary that eschews ready-made feminist stances. Liebenthal's femininity, suggests her documentary, has always been aspirational. As she records her lifelong friends reminiscing over memorabilia of their not-too-distant past (printed photos, images on compact discs, digitized home videos, and so forth), the documentary dives into the thinly veiled sexual experimentation of childhood games and their ill-timed girlhood assumptions about feminine sex appeal.

What does this intermedial palimpsest enable in Liebenthal's meditation on feminine allure? My approach seeks to marry discursive-based scholarship inspired by Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Irina Rajewsky that reads intermedial productions as hybrid media forms with a more phenomenological approach proffered by Henk Oosterling and Ágnes Pethő, who highlight the "in-betweenness" of media relations that must be "sensed" rather than read (Pethő 2011, 66). As such, this article focuses on the way in which the film's intermedial flare addresses fundamental issues related to aspirational femininity by bringing into play the ideological and visceral tensions that surface. I argue that the documentary enacts a fusion of media rather than a mere accumulation or constellation; that is, rather than distribute Liebenthal's discursive authority in rhizomatic fashion, the "in-betweenness" of media art foregrounds her distinctively "masculine" voice as she explores the liminality of life stages—girlhood, adolescence, and womanhood—and thresholds of femininity. Crucially, I propose that this merger of media, what Henry Jenkins calls media convergence, also elicits haptic responses that appeal to the physical body of the viewer.² Although the film's young women are fixated on their own images—past and present—Liebenthal has, in post-production, reduced the primacy of the film's visual logic, subordinating image to slow-to-focus and shaky takes of the overly reflective surfaces of amateur photos. The physical exchange of media heightens audience awareness of the materiality and the mediality of the cultural practices that reinforce standards of femininity. These lo-fi techniques also filter the reality of femininity in

¹ *Las lindas* debuted at the Rotterdam International Film Festival (Netherlands, 2016), where it won the Bright Future Award. The film's domestic debut was well received at the Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente (Argentina, 2016), where Liebenthal won best director in the Argentine competition.

² Jenkins conceives of convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" in search of entertainment (2006, 2). Hapticity refers to cinematic effects that are registered by the eyes and ears but are also felt throughout the body as sensory perception and affective reception (Marks 1999).

such a way as to make it unsteady, incomplete, and never quite in focus. The hypermediacy of this portrayal of femininity, I conclude, forestalls any notion of its completion or attainability.

If we understand intermediality in film studies as those relationships between multiple discourses and modalities of experience and representation, we can then ask in what ways Liebethal's film—and its pluriform take on femininity—is a product of specific intermedial qualities. I am interested in intermediality as both object and method of study, meaning I will be examining specific medial configurations within *Las lindas* to better understand how Liebethal's film negotiates gendered discourse, as well as how it distinguishes itself from other Spanish-American, autobiographical documentaries. As method, an intermedial approach emphasizes the “in-betweenness” of media and, therefore, is an apt heuristic for considering liminal states explored by Liebethal, in particular her probe into the relative thresholds of femininity as one moves from childhood to adolescence to womanhood.

In this article I mobilize “intermediality” as a generic term for phenomena that result from the combination of otherwise relatively distinct media within cinema. Although a growing number of intermedial scholars have argued that all artforms—medially complex or otherwise—are essentially intermedial, as David Rodowick has countered, medial specificity on the basis of difference remains a useful (if admittedly paradoxical and at times unsustainable) means to perceiving specific traits of a film as the result of a multimedial or heteromedial artform (2007, 41).³ That is, even if we accept that though specific media may only be distinguished relationally and differentially from other named media, we must agree to abide by some language conventions that allow us to differentiate, if only temporarily, a photo from, say, a moving picture. Even as medium writes over and reframes medium, at least some layers of the palimpsest remain patently identifiable (Pethő 2011, 82).

The application of intermediality theories to the study of film often pursues one of two bifurcated paths: intermediality tends to be either a means to deciphering a film's discursive semiotics or a sensational analytic for pursuing a phenomenological interpretation. Favoring the latter, for example, media philosopher Oosterling has skillfully argued that the merging of media must be “sensed” rather than “read” (2003, 41). Pethő agrees: “Intermediality and most of all intermediality in the cinema is not something one ‘deciphers,’ it is something one perceives or senses” (2011, 66-67). I suggest, however, that these two approaches need not be mutually or intellectually exclusive, and in the following pages we will interrogate one film as an audiovisual and haptic media convergence that enables both a discursive and phenomenological “reading” and “sensing,” respectively. As Jensen has explained, discursive intermediality in itself “denotes communication through several discourses at once, including through combinations of different sensory modalities of interaction, for instance music and moving images” (2016, 972). It makes sense to parse these discourses and sensory modalities concurrently. In practice, the constellation of discursive, affective, and sensational effects of medial combinations suggests a convergence of media greater than the sum of its juxtaposed parts which is both read and felt by an active, embodied consumer (Jenkins 2006, 3-4).

This hybrid intermedial approach to *Las lindas* also helps explain the interplay of reflexivity and immediacy within its cinematic apparatus. Whereas immediacy (sometimes referred to as media transparency) is the effect of portraying everything in an as authentic and unmediated way as possible, reflexivity is the effect of techniques that break the transparency of

³ Bruhn and Gjelsvik's concept of “heteromediality” “signifies the general, a priori condition of mixedness” (2018, 8). For discussion, see also Gaudreault and Marion 2002; Oosterling 2003; Jenkins 2006; Wurth 2006; Schröter 2011; Bruhn and Gjelsvik 2018; and Pethő 2011.

filmic image and sound and thus draw attention to the conventions of the filmmaking process itself. Though always ultimately an illusion, the sensation of immediacy can sometimes be achieved through reflexive intermedial techniques.⁴ Liebethal's documentary frequently manifests a desire for immediacy while at the same time turning to tropes of self-conscious hypermediacy (the multiplication of media within media) that sharpen awareness of the documentary as medium. One recurrent, reflexive strategy in *Las lindas* is to investigate older still images in a contemporary moving-image context, thereby questioning what Bill Nichols has called "the solemn, indexical bond between an indexical image and what it represents" (2017, 128). Liebethal's use of documentary conventions such as a handheld camera and sync sound (sound recorded on location) make the footage feel more intimate, more immediate. At the same time, the handling of old photos and the physical exchange of media makes palpable Liebethal's personal investment and her material involvement in the process of making the film. The documentary thus maximizes indices of multimediality by using representations of former selves and former collectives that result in a seemingly endless process of self-inscription, and these techniques heighten audience awareness of the materiality and the mediality of the cultural practices that teach, enforce, and measure standards of femininity.

Lo-Fi Aesthetics

With its very title a reference to a group of recognizably attractive women, one of the documentary's premises is that femininity is a particular kind of identifiable beauty. It is curious, then, that Liebethal's cinematography appears deliberately messy, ugly even; she has opted for lo-fi methods. Lo-fi, short for low fidelity, describes recordings that are not sufficiently clear and balanced, which produce "a homegrown, unpolished sensibility" (Neal 2022, 38). Brian Jones defines lo-fi as the "sonic foregrounding of roughness in [the] production process": a lo-fi recording sounds as if it were produced in a non-professional setting because of perceived sonic imperfections, such as hisses or clicks caused by the recording media or amateurish mistakes in the performance itself (2014, 42).⁵ Unpolished performances, mechanical noises, too-distant microphones, and traces of media degradation (such as the crackle of dust on vinyl)—these and other tropes of lo-fi sound muddy the relatively sterile clarity of digital recording with aural roughness. Cognate techniques in the photographic arts, such as incorrect exposure, graininess, soft focus, and vignetting, achieve a similar effect in visual media. In countering prevailing standards of higher production values, lo-fi aesthetics create a meaningful patina of age and authenticity (Neal 2022, 32-33; Jones 2014, 57).

Liebethal's lo-fi techniques constantly call attention to the imperfections of image and sound, filtering the "reality" of femininity in such a way as to make it unsteady, unfinished, and slightly out of focus. When applied to the rendering of femininity, lo-fi techniques in *Las lindas* also create the perception of honesty and nonchalance, which, as Adam Scott Neal reminds us, are two sides of the same coin: "an acknowledgement of limitations, and a dismissal that these limits

⁴ See, for example, Pethó's analysis of Agnès Varda's and José Luis Guerín's films: "media within media produce an intermedial structure that in each case conveys not a sense of infinite regress of signification, [...] but a configuration that conveys paradoxically a sense of immediacy both on a more general level (exemplifying the multiple faces of media versus reality or media within reality) and on a more specific, personal level (in the sense of recording one's own personal experiences handling these media)" (2011, 351).

⁵ Lo-fi, a term popularized in the 1990s, should not be confused with lofi (without the hyphen), which refers to a genre of music "characterised by low energy and density as much as it is characterised by audio quality" (Neal 2022, 32).

matter” (2022, 38). Here, these limitations are both technical and thematic, by which I mean that Liebenthal, who was a student at Universidad del Cine in Argentina at the time of production, was still honing her craft in what would become her first feature film; thematically, her exploration of womanhood is imbued with signifiers of inexperience and humility. As a relatively novice filmmaker and a self-proclaimed outsider within the realm of femininity, the lo-fi aesthetic proves opportune.

The film’s reflexivity breaks the transparency of the filmic image and highlights its own construction as it interrogates the theme of “becoming woman.” Abrupt scene changes, preservation of distracting background noises, and overly reflective surfaces are just some of the aesthetic attributes (strategies, some might say) of Liebenthal’s rendering of a femininity that refuses to be fully enclosed or actualized. Nor does the film offer a redemptive turn with make-over dramatics or re-written personal affirmations that would outwardly or inwardly transform an ugly duckling into a swan by the documentary’s final fade to black. Instead, the film projects a lo-fi femininity that highlights with imperfections the distortions one must put herself through to embody a somewhat more tangible representation of what feminine beauty might look like.

The film forms part of the appropriately named genre, *documental de formación femenina*, whose sine qua non is the self-inscription of a director as both spectator and participant.⁶ One might be forgiven for thinking *Las lindas* seems fairly conventional, myopic even: the film is about a group of white, upper-middle-class young women looking at photos and videos of themselves, a premise none too innovative. Indeed, the film does draw on a long tradition inspired by pioneers of cinema vérité and feminist autobiographical documentary in which the camera records female subjects who are aware they are being filmed but show few signs of that awareness. As Julia Lesage observed of feminist documentaries in the 1970s, “These films often show women in the private sphere getting together to define/redefine their experiences and to elaborate a strategy for making inroads on the public sphere” (2016, 669). The aims of *Las lindas* are not, however, so strategic. The subjects in Liebenthal’s film dance, put on makeup, and debate one another without a shared activist agenda, and with a naturalness cultivated by years of supporting one another as intimate friends. Even Liebenthal’s interviews seem equally interested in parsing how her friends’ experiences compare to her own as they are in some more generalizable discursive agenda. For example, when Liebenthal presses her friend to explain why, as a child, she wore boyish clothing and avoided girly activities such as painting her nails, her friend refuses to complicate the matter: “No me interesaba. Yo quería jugar al Game Boy y el Pokémon, y nada. Era como... más simple” (47:30). Although Liebenthal’s autobiographical film does grant her friends freedom from the rigid codification of women’s gestures and speech in cinema, this autoethnography based on contingent, often trivial events is not striving to be a political act carried out in the private sphere, as has been the case for many documentary films focused on womanhood (Lesage 2016, 674).

Las lindas also marks a departure from the emergence of a subjective turn in turn-of-the-century Latin American documentary, which tends to use the first-person to foreground the role of the filmmaker as a politically discursive agent. Although Latin American documentary of the 1990s was not primarily an instrument of self-discovery (Paranaguá 2003, 77), the “appeal to the subjective as a fertile realm of exploration and social intervention” starts to trend more personal at the turn of the century (Ana López 2014, 26). First-person, reflexive filmmaking and a concern with ethics become what María Guadalupe Arenillas and Michael J. Lazzara have called

⁶ “Formación” connotes both educational instruction (in the sense of personal development) and the action or result of giving or taking shape.

“hallmarks of turn-of-the-millennium Latin American documentary filmmaking” (2016, 7).⁷ In Argentine films from this period, even personal documentaries present an opportunity to investigate the country’s recent history (Antonio Gómez 2014). One thinks of *Los rubios* (2003) by Albertina Carri, who as Vinicius Navarro and Juan Carlos Rodríguez have observed, “is often present on the screen, rendering palpable the exploratory and highly reflexive character of her film,” but at the same time suggesting that her history is also shared by other Argentines (2014, 9). On the contrary, *Las lindas* relegates activism and the typical tropes present in the works of those born in the 1990s (Menemismo, the economic crisis of 1998-2002, and the aftermath of dictatorship) to the background. In *Las lindas* present-day reminiscing becomes a proxy for a longitudinal study of perceptions of femininity within the intimacy of one’s own friend group. Liebenthal’s work does not assume that her history is shared by other Argentines, not even, in fact, by her closest friends.

The film’s high degree of reflexivity, coupled with the motive explorations of “becoming woman,” forgoes any claim to impartial truth. Instead, what happens in front of the camera is an unveiling of the nature of the interaction between filmmaker and her friend-subjects via a mix of performative and participatory documentary modes. According to Nichols’ taxonomy of such modes,

[Performative documentary] sets out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society. [...] The referential quality of documentary that attests to its function as a window onto the world yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects, including the filmmaker on that world.

(2017, 149-150)

In most sequences Liebenthal remains beyond the field of the camera lens, but the off-screen sound of her voice responding to and inciting her friends’ interventions, along with the shakiness of the footage, bears traces of the director’s body and craftsmanship. As the film’s form takes shape in the editing room, with voice-over and musical tracks laid over heteromedial visual tracks, we get a sense of what it has been like for Liebenthal to be included in this group of girls-turned-women and, notwithstanding said inclusion, to experience femininity differently. She is not one of the “pretty ones.”

Sidelining the Masculine Gaze

Even though feminine desirability is one of the film’s primary preoccupations, the traditional apparatus of the masculine gaze is simply not the guiding visual framework of the film. There are, in fact, hardly any men portrayed in the film at all. At one point, Liebenthal even confesses, “Nunca grabé hombres” (43:46). Nor does she frame shots of her friends in a way that would cater to heterosexual male desire, even when, say, they are dancing at a nightclub. More often, she focuses

⁷ Leonor Arfuch has observed this widespread subjective turn in other areas of cultural expression as well, including literature, politics, mass media, and academic research (2002).

on their faces, their feet, and her own imperfections.⁸ The film instead concentrates on the ways in which these individuals have, since childhood, negotiated the so-called ways of womanhood and often imposed these strictures on themselves and each other.

Remediation of archival objects and contemporary media allow for a discourse of continuity (Russell 2018, 102-103), even though the young women seem to think of their past as belonging to a distant time. Because Liebenthal's documentary remediates pre-existing photographic and filmic artifacts, the film not only captures a set of reflections in the present on past states of aspirational femininity (more about which later) but also documents the ephemeral joy of childhood play. Many of the photographs revive memories about trying to appear attractive to their male classmates, but this kind of male-oriented gender performance fades to the background in photos and videos they create just for themselves. As the girls perform for one another, they ignore any gaze exterior to the confines of their play. The resulting artifacts are parodies of femininity produced just for laughter, not for potential seduction.

One such video of Josefina as a girl starts with a shot of an era-appropriate stereo emitting Britney Spears' 1998 hit song, "Baby One More Time," rendered in lo-fi direct sound that reproduces recurrent skips caused either by a scratched compact disc or by some problem with the microphone (25:07-26:17). This continuous shot of Josefina dancing and imitating Spears in expression, dress (white crop top and dark skirt), and movements of course approximates an adult sexuality, but for whom? An adult male gaze is absent from Liebenthal's childhood footage. About forty seconds into the clip, a clear intervention from the editing room switches the sync audio to a louder, post-synchronized version of the song, which moves the sonic experience away from its original immediacy towards a reflective positionality in the present. Although the use of post-synchronized sound often creates a stronger sense of verisimilitude in a given scene, here the effect is quite the opposite. The compelling juxtaposition of such distinct sound qualities renders Josefina's performance as aspirational rather than realistic, and we enter a space and sound of childhood whimsy.

One other sequence, this time featuring scenes between Liebenthal and Camila, clearly attests to the girls' ludic treatment of adult norms of femininity and feminine sexuality. In one scene, Camila parodies a middle-aged *porteña* at the turn of the twenty-first century (Figure 1). Somewhere between the ages of nine and twelve, Camila is dressed in stockings, black heels that are clearly too big, a long red skirt, and a multi-colored top under a red shawl. On occasion, she draws an unlit cigarette to her lips. The scene begins with a dialogue with the young Liebenthal, who is behind a handheld camera, as if the two were shooting an infomercial about stockings (which are "ultra transparentes" [37:47]). As Camila proposes that the two take a seat, she asks her playmate, "¿Qué te parece, Guillermo?", which elicits an audible laugh from Liebenthal, who takes the improvisational cue in stride (38:00). The next shot features Camila discussing politics, clearly in parodic fashion: "Esta etapa de los 2000, mira me cayó muy bien. Cambiamos de presidente. Menem ya era una locura, ¿viste? [...] Por eso ahora estoy con De la Rúa, me parece una buena persona" (38:13-38:31).⁹ As this clip gives way to another of Camila singing and braiding Liebenthal's hair, the director explains in voice-over that Camila was once her favorite actress: "Grabarnos con la cámara nos unía, era nuestro juego. Camila me dice, 'El juego era entre

⁸ This is not to say that she and her friends do not impose an objectifying gaze on themselves and others. In one sequence that takes place at a dinner gathering, Michelle ("Micha") argues that the actor Jesse Williams of *Grey's Anatomy* is too hot for his then wife, whom she deems ugly and overweight: "¡La mina es un orto!" (01:03:44).

⁹ Successor of Carlos Menem, Fernando de la Rúa was a center-left President of Argentina for two years (1999-2001), during the apex of Argentina's worst financial crisis.

nosotras, los videos eran para nosotras mismas, y nos moríamos si alguien más los veía” (38:37-38:53). For them, knowing that their audience was circumscribed allowed a freedom of expression rarely reproduced later in life.



Fig. 1 Camila Magliano pretends to be an adult and speaks about politics as she takes puffs from an unlit cigarette (38:21). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.



Fig. 2 Melisa Liebenthal dresses in costume and dances as her friend sings acapella (39:39). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

The girls’ exuberant laughter punctuates Liebenthal’s nostalgic voice-over, and this unencumbered joviality carries into a second scene, which this time features Camila behind the camera and Liebenthal in front. A young Liebenthal is dressed in an unusual quantity of layers with some sort of laced textile draped over her head as she dances to Camila singing her own adaptation of “I’m Too Sexy” by Right Said Fred (Figure 2). Her lyrics— “Ay, que sexy soy yo, no me lo digas más, porque soy un corazón un corazón. Ay, que baby sexy sos, no me lo digas

más, soy todo tu amor. Ay, que sexy baby sos, no me lo digas más, sos todo mi amor. Ay, que sexy baby sos, sos mi universo, sos todo mi amor ...” (37:40-40:05)—and their barely repressed laughter preserve the discursive continuity of these many parodies of adult modes of expression. From the perspective and position of childhood, the two enact a sexualization of their bodies, but on their own terms, and for their own end: entertainment.

The ludic self-awareness demonstrated in these scenes enables a light-hearted register that undercuts any potential lascivious or foreboding sentiment. That is, however, until Liebenthal and her sound designer (Marcos Canosa) distort the last word of Camila’s song, such that the sound of the final syllable of “amor” becomes unnaturally decelerated, its pitch ominously lowered. This distortion marks a transition in the documentary, and the playfully documented dynamic between best friends yields to a growing sense of self-consciousness on Liebenthal’s part. The very next scene of the sequence, time-stamped February 9, 2001, features a slightly older Liebenthal on camera in an apartment gym. She explains in voice-over, “A esa edad, mi cuerpo me avergonzaba. Hubiera querido taparme completamente. De alguna forma, entendía que la fisionomía del cuerpo femenino, por ende de mi cuerpo, llamaba la atención sexual” (40:07-40:30). Instead of laughter, this time, it is Liebenthal’s outstretched hand and diegetic command, “¡Pará!”, that terminate the sequence (Figure 3). This final gesture works to the dramatic benefit of the film, but it also marks an abrupt end to the children’s own unencumbered perception of their play *as* play and shifts to a perception adulterated (pun intended) by normative expectations of sex and gender presentation among adults.



Fig. 3 An adolescent Liebenthal abruptly stops a skit, blurting “¡Pará!” (40:30). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

Re-Reading and Re-Sensing Thresholds of Femininity

Until this point, we have focused on remediating videos from years past. In what follows, we will turn our attention to the intermedial fusion of other forms of media, including still photos, sculpture, and mixed media collage. Dick Higgins, who in the sixties first coined the term “intermedia,” describes intermedial works as those in which materials from various known

artforms fuse together to create art “not governed by rules” of one form or medium (1984, 21); “intermedia” thus describes “works which fall conceptually between media” that are more established (23). As Jens Schröter has helpfully clarified, “media synthesis” is a product of “perceptive and cognitive assimilation,” rather than a part of the intermedium itself. In other words, for there to have been a fusion, the scholar-viewer must be able to name and parse the blended media (2011, para. 4).¹⁰ Although it is possible to discuss the intermedial qualities of *Las lindas* in less synthetic terms, I find it most useful to consider how an intermedial product amounts to more than the sum of its parts, both discursively and sensually. The film represents a merger of different types of media into a coherent if eclectic whole governed by the voice of the film’s creator, her camera movements, and her editorial decisions.

I identify two notable effects of this intermedial fusion. First, given the unexpected combination of established and emerging media in *Las lindas*, the film breaks up habituated forms of enacting and perceiving femininity. Second, because the vococentrism of Liebenthal’s voice-over conditions the film’s rhythm and cogency, this intermedial fusion deconstructs “knowledge” about femininity without distributing Liebenthal’s discursive authority. This authority, paradoxically, is informed by her positionality as an outsider in this meditation on coming of age while female. Below, I parse these two effects in greater detail as we consider several sequences in which her Socratic questions on the nature of feminine pulchritude encourage critical reflection on commonly held beliefs about femininity.

In several moments in the documentary, Liebenthal explores what makes some girls more attractive than others. The most sustained reflection on degrees of attractiveness, however, can be found in a sequence that remediates an online article entitled, “17 Little Things Attractive Girls Do Differently” (Motta 2014). Liebenthal highlights just four of these tidbits: they are happier, drink in moderation, are athletic, and are not a dead fish in bed (36:11-36:39). Each of these messages appears in typescript over a collage of images and animated GIFs that at once highlight the overly simplistic advice and layer the visual space with cheapened referents to this so-called desirable femininity. Many of the images in this montage of digital collages still bear the watermark of Shutterstock (a corporate provider of stock photography), and an invisible user scrolls the length of them in a curated reading pattern that connotes internet skimming. In the shot referring to the supposition that attractive girls drink in moderation, a prominent GIF of a pint of beer reads “LET’S GET DRUNK!” in purple, sparkling letters (Figure 4). To the right of the shot, a blonde even has her hair in rollers made from pink vodka bottles. A looped GIF, centered in the background and featuring a woman and her friends emptying a bottle, gives the collage some movement. Liebenthal’s digital mixed media, with layered photos, animations, and word art, undercut the authority of these prescriptions and encourage viewers to shift their perception of femininity through a process of re-sensing and re-reading.

¹⁰ Media present in *Las lindas* include printed photos, digital images (old and present-day, some displayed on cell phones and laptop screens), clips of home videos, internet memes, video animation, Google searches, digital collages of mixed media, music, a sampled clip from *Seinfeld*, and print non-fiction.

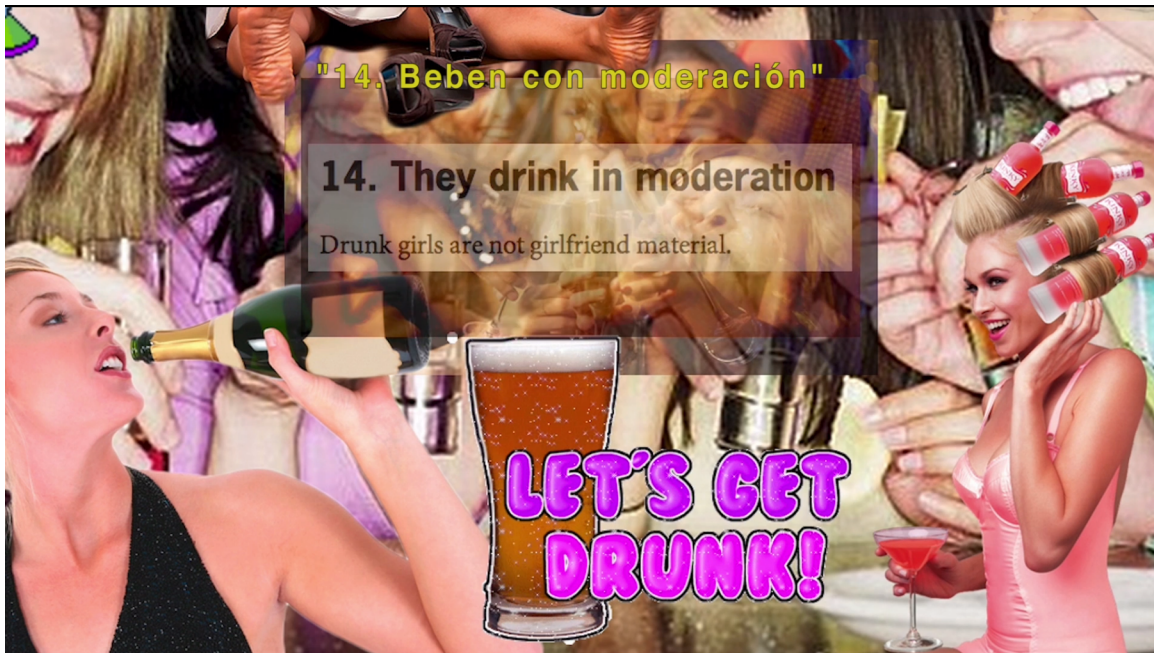


Fig. 4 One of four satiric mixed media collages subverting advice on what attractive girls do (36:20). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

Media influences notwithstanding, much of the pressure to step into traditionally feminized behaviors has come from within their own peer group, one with social hierarchies that did not always include Liebenthal. In an early sequence, her friend, Victoria, describes the norms of a game called “Semáforo” in which, one infers, the ludic tension revolves around the possibility of kissing other participants (11:52-17:57). She felt that her own popularity relative to others obliged her to make out with other popular boys playing the game, whether she wanted to or not. Her friend group— “las estrellitas”—were expected to be little *putitas*, more open to sexual advances. Behind the camera, Liebenthal responds in surprise, never having been subject to such pressure (“¡Guau, no sabía eso!” [13:00]), and later interrupts Victoria in her casual, low voice to say that, if some boy were to have ever presented her with a “red light” request, “Yo no sabría qué decir” (14:11). Visibly taken aback, her friend stops to laugh before continuing with what she was saying. That laugh betrays a small acknowledgement of the director’s outsider status within the group at that time.

Around the age of twelve, Victoria reports sensing a growing reticence to receive physical advances from male peers, especially when she was menstruating: who, she seems to be asking, would want to be patted on the butt at such a time? Once again, Liebenthal confesses ignorance on the point: “Yo no tengo idea, no hablaba con pibes. ¿Fue un tema?” (15:42). The issue of being touched sexually at a young age surfaces again in a separate conversation with Josefina. She tells Liebenthal about sneaking out as a child to go to a *boliche*, where “una horda de trogloditas” would encircle her and touch her “por todos lados” (28:23-28:58). Josefina reflects, “Lo pienso hoy y me da violencia” (28:33). Liebenthal, on the other hand, tells her friend that when Liebenthal was older, she would feel flattered when someone touched her butt, as if it were “un halago” (29:02). This admission causes Josefina’s eyebrows to shoot up as she replies, “Ah, ¿sí?” (29:05). Only half joking, Josefina concludes, “No entendiste nada” (29:24). The handling of old photos and the

physical exchange of media makes palpable Liebenthal’s personal experience and her material involvement in the process of making the film, but it also makes clear her unfamiliarity with certain foundational experiences of childhood sexuality.

Liebenthal’s film manifests an ongoing search for answers about the thresholds of feminine beauty, and why she so often judges herself short of meeting those thresholds. In a sequence focused on the origins of a widespread obsession with the physiognomy of the female body, Liebenthal’s cinematic apparatus turns to a screencast Google Image search for “venus paleolitica [sic]” (Figure 5). Screencasts, or digital recordings of a computer screen that capture a user’s actions, are often used to create video tutorials taught by users with relevant expertise. Here, however, Liebenthal captures an exercise in curiosity rather than certainty. A photo grid of nude figurines from Paleolithic times (at least 20,000 years ago) displays several faceless bodies with wide hips, rounded stomachs, and prominent breasts and vulva. Archeologists have debated possible interpretations of these figurines, but many have suggested that they are related to female fertility (McDermott 1996).¹¹ When the cursor audibly clicks to enlarge one of the photos and scrolls over the zoomed-in image, two thirds of the screen fill with body parts conventionally associated with childbearing (Figure 6). The proportions of these features are so enlarged that the statue’s arms, which rest above its voluminous breasts, appear atrophied.

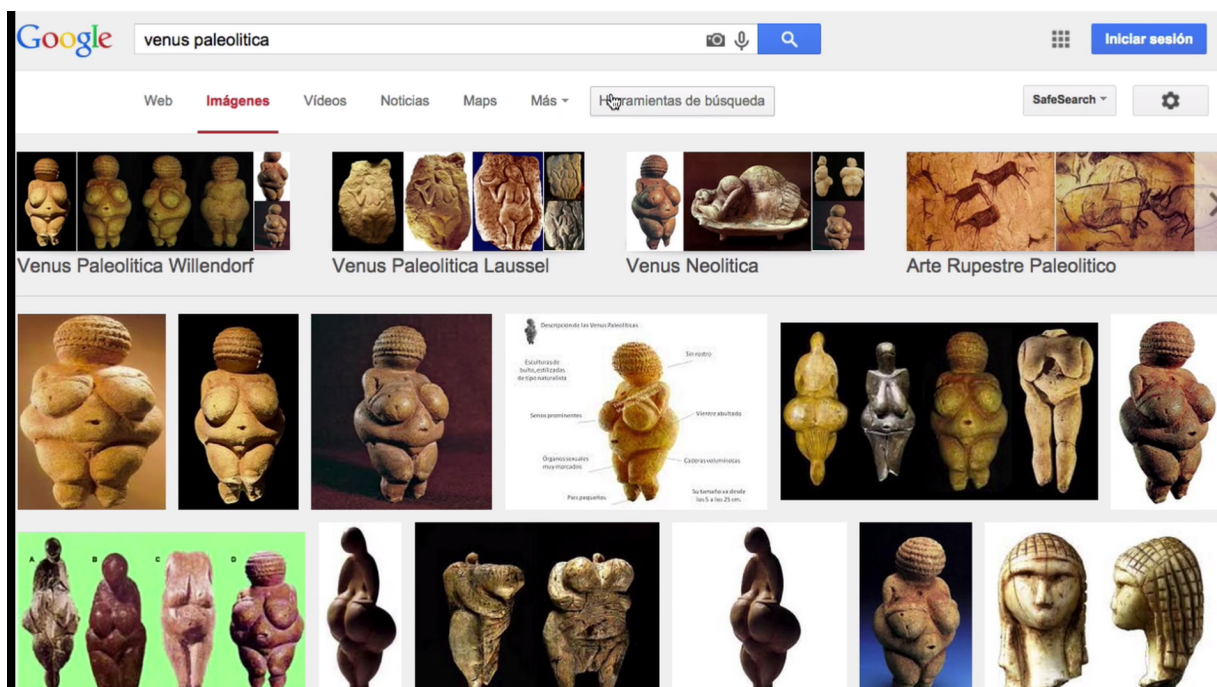


Fig. 5 A Google Image search displays various Venus figurines from Paleolithic times (40:35). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

¹¹ The reference to Venus, Roman goddess of fertility, is a bit of a misnomer since the statue predates Greco-Roman mythology by about two millennia.



Fig. 6 A zoomed-in image shows the textured surface of prominent breasts, belly, and vulva (40:49). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

The selected sculpture is commonly known as the *Venus of Willendorf* and is among the oldest known pieces of art in the world. Its presence in *Las lindas* serves multiple discursive and sensual ends. Beyond reminding viewers of just how long artists have been attempting to render femininity through art, the inclusion of this pocked, limestone figurine evokes a highly texturized image of an object designed, archaeologists suspect, to be handled, given its short stature of just 11.1 centimeters (Dixson and Dixson 2012). The statue's many folds and curves would fit easily into the palm of one's hand, and yet its magnified diminutive dimensions here exceed the frame of the screencast, which amplifies the already exaggerated features of this distorted idealization of the female form. Liebenthal's subsequent off-screen deliberation about the out-sized influence of "tetas y culo" attributes this excess to the roots of her present-day insecurity: "El peso y el poder potencial que tienen me excedía y me exceden. Así se gestó en mí una inhibición frente la mirada del otro" (40:51-41:04). This literal and reflexive searching deconstructs both popular and individually held "knowledge" about femininity, making it contingent, provisional, but also relational across the ages.

The Google Image search also presents an interesting case study of media convergence, which Jenkins describes as the merging of different media into a single platform, often a digital one, that is driven by changes in consumer behavior and technological advancements (2006, 3). The flow of content across multiple media platforms largely depends on consumers' participation, who "are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content. [...] Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives" (3-4). Jenkins' reference to a "personal mythology" could not be more

apt for describing the ways in which Liebenthal leverages an ancient totem of feminine prowess and desirability to contemplate the distorted norms of feminine beauty in her own time.

In one of the longest sequences of the film, Liebenthal studies the case of her good friend, Josefina, who works as a model (25:07-34:51). The ten-minute sequence includes the previously mentioned home video of Josefina dancing to Britney Spears, a revelatory interview about Josefina's childhood memories, and footage from her recent photoshoots. The interview discloses the insecurities Josefina had as a child with scoliosis, braces, and a figure slower to develop than her female peers'. Josefina laughs as she mimes exaggerated impressions of her "uglier" former self. Liebenthal's uncontrollable off-screen chuckling and bouncing camera movements foster solidarity with Jorgelina's self-critique. A series of costumed photos from this time, however, reveal a nascent beauty coached into coquettish poses and attire (Figure 7). A made-up face, parted lips, and expressive eyes evince tropes of an emergent sexual desirability. Liebenthal's camera tilts down the length of a portrait photo of Josefina in a belted dress and hesitates on Josefina's girlish thighs. On their own, the shots might strike an uncomfortably sexual register, but the dactyl presence of Josefina's fingers displaying her own images, the familiar tremble of Liebenthal's camera, and the two women's measured critiques of the costume design choices mollify the sexualized overtones of the shots.



Fig. 7 An old photo of Josefina, dressed in a 1960s costume, displays a nascent talent for modeling (32:18). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

The sequence documents not only the sartorial but also the anatomical fashioning of a body coded as highly feminine. Aside from the braces on her teeth, Josefina explains that around this age she regularly wore an orthopedic brace to slow the progression of the scoliosis, and this brace caused her great embarrassment. Her doctor assured her, however, that she would end up with the body of a model (“una cintura diminuta y una postura bárbara” [32:47]), and, indeed, she did. The

treatment has left her with a 55-centimeter waist, which she presently describes as “un poco deforme” (33:02).¹² “Deformed” connotes disfigurement or unsightliness, and yet it seems that her bodily irregularity is a key source of her recognizable beauty in Argentina today. Anomalously attractive, Josefina’s oddly slim waist becomes an appealing aberration.

A jump cut in the interview then sutures a semantic connection between this “deformity” and Josefina’s own recognition of her beauty. She reports being about fifteen when she realized that she was attractive to others: “Siempre, digamos, estuve en los parámetros de lo técnicamente... es que [decían] ‘Ella es flaca, rubiecita, tiene ojitos almendrados... ¿Querés ser modelo?’ desde que era muy chiquita” (33:23-33:36). These interactions reaffirmed for her that society found her beautiful, even though in her youth she did not always feel that way: “No me sentía una mujer, entonces no sentía que era objeto de deseo de nadie” (33:55-34:01). After a brief lull filled with chilling extradiegetic guitar notes, the scene ends there before cutting to a modern-day, professional shoot of Josefina. What I find striking about this exchange between director and subject is the way it teases out an explanation of how two things can be true at the same time: as a child, Josefina did not yet understand herself as a desirable body, and yet, she caught the attention of adults who saw potential in commercializing her already-grown-enough aesthetic appeal. In the short span of just a few years, Josefina’s orthodontic and orthopedic braces helped craft an inviting irregularity, appealing to the adult eye. Like the paleolithic statue, the model embodies the “right” deformities of femininity in her culture.

The last segment in this sequence focused on Josefina ponders the very essence of photogenicity, and in so doing marks a noticeable departure from the lo-fi visuals of the rest of the documentary (34:05-37:43). The segment lasts three and half minutes and begins with four professional stills from Josefina’s modern-day modeling career. Unlike the other photographic images of Liebenthal’s friends in the documentary, these are not remediated in the same way; there is no shaky camera, no out-of-focus lull, no abrupt transitions, and no fingers grasping at their edges. Each image fills the screen with a stillness and clarity scarce in the documentary. In a way, these shots feel *less* mediated and provide unobstructed access to a stylized form of hi-fi femininity. Despite the reflexive nature of these photographs, the immediacy of the montage seems to be saying, *this is, unquestionably, what beauty looks like.*

The reintroduction of Liebenthal’s post-production voice-over further stresses this aesthetic shift by initiating a monologic essay entitled “La fotogenia.” Liebenthal begins by offering a definition: “La fotogenia es una cualidad preciada. Fotogénico es quien tiene buenas condiciones para ser reproducido por la imagen fotográfica” (34:10-34:19). The lexical origin of the discourse takes an individuated turn, however, as Liebenthal wonders aloud about the mimetic fidelity of beauty rendered photographically: “Ser fotogénica es salir bien en las fotos. Pero para salir bien en las fotos, ¿tengo que ser atractiva fuera de ellas? Si soy linda, ¿puedo no ser fotogénica, o si no soy fotogénica es porque soy fea?” (34:21-34:42). As Liebenthal narrates, the stills give way to short videos of Josefina’s photoshoots, which, in turn, become devices that deconstruct the ideology of photogenicity by providing access to a less curated reality of feminine beauty.

¹² Her waist is equivalent to 21.6 inches. For comparison, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the average waist circumference of a woman in the United States is 38.7 inches (2021).



Fig. 8 Josefina poses during a photoshoot (34:24). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

The film withholds the photographic artifacts from these shoots, choosing instead to render the process of each shoot with footage from distinct angles and scales of shot. In the first video, a wide shot documents a cross-section of Josefina holding a pose with one leg lifted in the air; what likely would resemble a brief, dynamic movement in a skillfully composed photo here appears carefully positioned and patiently maintained (Figure 8). The wider angle of Liebenthal's camera also reveals unattractive elements of the shoot's location, presumably outside of the photographer's frame, including a large pile of black trash bags that contrast with the clean cream color of the model's ensemble. The sequence features four photoshoots in total, the last of which closes with Liebenthal's handheld camera trained on the photographer of the shoot, rather than on the model. These recursive strategies, both visual and vocal, meditate on the mediation of physical appeal and highlight the artificiality of mediated beauty. Even as Liebenthal vocally reaffirms that Josefina is visually attractive in photographs simply because the camera reflects her actual physical appearance (i.e., she is pretty before and after the shutter of the camera), the footage partially undercuts Liebenthal's conclusions by demonstrating that factors such as lighting, angles, and camera settings all play a role in how photogenic someone appears.

Self-Representation and Disidentification

Following this segment on photogenicity, Liebenthal then deconstructs photos of herself, which never seem to convey the impression she intends. A digital animation shows how light enters a camera, traverses its apparatus, and passes through to the display on the backside. There, a selfie of an unsmiling Liebenthal awaits (Figure 9). This supremely reflexive scene illustrates in hypermediated fashion how an ephemeral digital image of aspirational femininity remains dually bound to the materiality of an embodied subject and of a recording device, with its optical

components, pixelated sensor, and memory card. The solemnity of her voice, her face, and the music track (a lowkey guitar with a repetitive strumming pattern) bely the cheerful mood expected of feminine selfies these days. Liebenthal weighs the implications of her perceived lack of photogenic qualities in voice-over: “Si salgo mal en las fotos, entonces soy fea. ¿Salgo mal, soy fea, o soy yo la que me veo fea a mí misma? No importa, la inseguridad ya está instilada” (34:58-35:15). Here is the age-old question about the reach of mechanical reproduction, but also the locus of beauty itself. Is it in the eye of the (self-)beholder, in the photographed object, or in the photographic artifact itself? Nicole Erin Morse—whose research on self-representational artwork by trans women feminine artists challenges the notion of the selfie as a narcissistic frivolity—argues that the intersubjective qualities of the selfie generate a “mutual act of recognition,” such that the selfie *viewer* (not its creator) says, “I see you showing me you” (2022, 1). *Las lindas*’s sustained attentiveness to Liebenthal as subject—whether on-camera or behind it—interpolates the spectator into a process of critique. Are we to perceive Liebenthal’s lo-fi femininity as more beautiful than she claims it to be, or is the point simply to foreground the “noise” of even the most hi-fi beauty? These questions are left suspended in the air without any note of political agency or pathic plea. Here, too, the film’s narrative threads intersect without a sense of closure; they pose more questions than answers. This segment is emblematic of a documentary that precludes redemptive statements on just what makes women attractive. That is, the film does not enclose femininity, especially Liebenthal’s own.



Fig. 9 A computer-generated animation showing how an image passes through a camera reveals Liebenthal’s selfie on the back display (35:15). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

The closing sequence is a sort of protracted video selfie, with over three minutes of footage trained directly at Liebenthal’s tightly framed face. Ever the director, she faces a tripod mounted camera, dons a pair of headphones, and holds up a microphone that bobs in and out of the frame as she records her friend reading aloud from a book of astrology (01:11:15-01:14:31).¹³

¹³ Camila reads from Eugenio Carutti’s *Las lunas: El refugio de la memoria* (2005), an astrology reference book, and focuses on the chapter most relevant to Liebenthal: “Gemini.”

Liebenthal's voice-over commentary interrupts the reading to draw attention to the way it *feels* to be both subject and object of the camera:

Me miro en el viewfinder, controlo mi cara, todo el tiempo consciente de que estoy siendo grabada, registrada. [...] La doble auto-conciencia que implica tener una cámara en frente es más fuerte, y no quiere ceder. Es que la mirada, cualquier mirada, escanea y evalúa, opina y juzga. Y para mí, siempre primero de forma negativa. Está bien, no es necesariamente así, pero la mayor parte del tiempo no me acuerdo de eso.

(01:12:45-01:13:49)

As with her former selfies and many childhood portraits, she allows the camera to capture her face more or less at rest, though her voice-over reveals that even a neutral face is in some cases a disciplined one (Figure 10). The headphones and microphone are overt indices of filmmaking, and coupled with the reflexive comments above, these metacinematic interventions highlight the visceral tensions that surface for Liebenthal in the process of self-contemplation made public at the same time. As she listens to her friend read about Liebenthal's astrological sign, she reports finding comfort in being identified with these universal archetypes, and yet her favorite part is a section that encourages readers to disidentify from what we know about ourselves: "El mecanismo de la Luna consiste en el anhelo de permanecer para siempre en la base, identificado con aquella cualidad a través de la cual se entró a la vida, sin crecer jamás. En términos energéticos, crecer quiere decir abrirse a los niveles desconocidos de sí mismo y *desidentificarse* de lo conocido" (01:14:03-01:14:26). The film ends seconds after these words are pronounced, which punctuates a film-long intrigue in a dialectic that seeks to reconcile universal and personal accounts of femininity but resolves none of the film's main questions or concerns. Instead, they are an entreaty to continue growing by consciously disassociating oneself from previously held beliefs, values, and behaviors that, although may provide a sense of belonging, keep one from facing uncomfortable or unfamiliar aspects of oneself.



Fig. 10 A still from Melisa Liebenthal's video selfie (01:11:15). Courtesy of Melisa Liebenthal y Gentil Cine SRL.

Throughout *Las lindas*, the director endeavors to trace the beginnings of her own misgivings regarding the pursuit of feminine attractiveness, and in so doing enacts a disidentification from things long known to her: societal pressures to conform, internalized body dissatisfaction, and even the perspectives of her closest circle of friends. The film thus holds space for alternative modes of self-recognition and feminine expression, including prominent belly hairs and unsmiling faces. Even as the film excavates certain commonly held tropes of feminine beauty, it does so in such a way as to make clear that such beauty is rather more mediated than one might think. Disidentifying from these tropes is an organizing principle of the film, which Liebenthal enacts by roughing up the edges of femininity to give it, in many ways, a less natural look that appeals to sensual modes of critique. “Reading” a photograph mediated by Liebenthal’s shaky, slow-to-focus camera is a multisensorial experience for audience members because such shots transmit a sensual fullness registered by a spectator in more ways than just the visual sense to which they are attributed. These techniques pointedly reduce the primacy of the visual logic of attractiveness, subordinating it to jarring jump cuts, jerky scrolling with audible mouse clicks, and poor audio quality recorded years ago on what is now obsolete recording media. These lo-fi aesthetics offer a palpable materiality that calls on an embodied spectator, who through intermedial sensations, can sense the contours—the assembly—of a femininity that is always aspirational.

I have set out to analyze how the intermedial qualities of *Las lindas* cohere around a question concerning the materiality and mediality of emergent femininity in adolescence and young adulthood. In a classic deconstructivist fashion, the film becomes a means to probe collectives, cultural beliefs, and practices that reinforce certain standards of femininity that have so far been unattainable for Liebenthal. By combining traditional discourse analysis with a more sensational analytic, we can identify both ideological and somatic tensions evoked by Liebenthal’s sustained meditation on how to locate thresholds of feminine beauty. I have argued that an analysis of the film’s lo-fi, aspirational femininity makes transparent the distortions of the self in pursuit of one’s becoming “feminine.” Assembled from multiple media forms roughly sutured together with visible and audible seams, Liebenthal’s cinematic rendering of femininity chafes against reified forms of *lo femenino* while maintaining a sense of tangible connection to the physicality of feminine embodiments and its mediality. The production value itself becomes a discursive and sensual source of meaning that imbues digital filmmaking with enough visual and sonic “noise” to add a ludic yet critical subtext to the film. *Las lindas* eschews the glossy production of commercial femininity while at the same time making frequent references to these very productions, including representations of female desirability in magazines, sculpture, and iconic celebrity photos, here remediated in such a way as to degrade their pristine patina and to reveal how inconsonant they are with her own life experiences.

Remarkably, the various media artifacts incorporated into the film grammar expressly augment Liebenthal’s discursive authority. As director, interviewer, and voice-over narrator, Liebenthal’s discursive influence within the documentary is hard to overstate, and yet, as I have demonstrated, Liebenthal positions herself as a kind of inexpert woman still approximating the ways of femininity. As she documents the evolution of her friends’ bodies in the nostalgic guise of childhood remembering, it becomes clear that Liebenthal has missed out on some of the coming-of-age rites of passage into womanhood that her more popular friends experienced. In the present day, the cinematic apparatus formally accentuates this marked difference between Liebenthal and her filmed subjects, for she mostly occupies the sonic periphery of a voice-over narrator and off-

screen interviewer. The result is a more humble, more curious take on femininity from one who locates herself on its margins.

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