

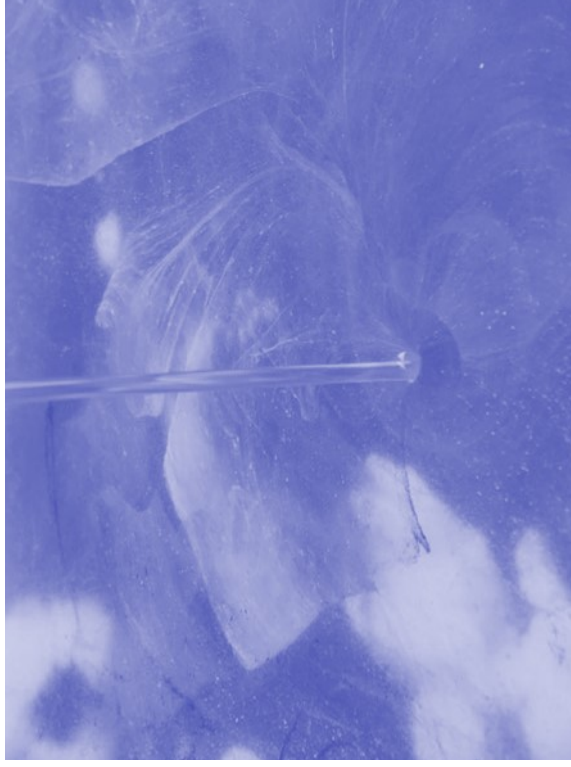
History between dreaming and waking: Leonor Serrano Rivas' *Estrella*

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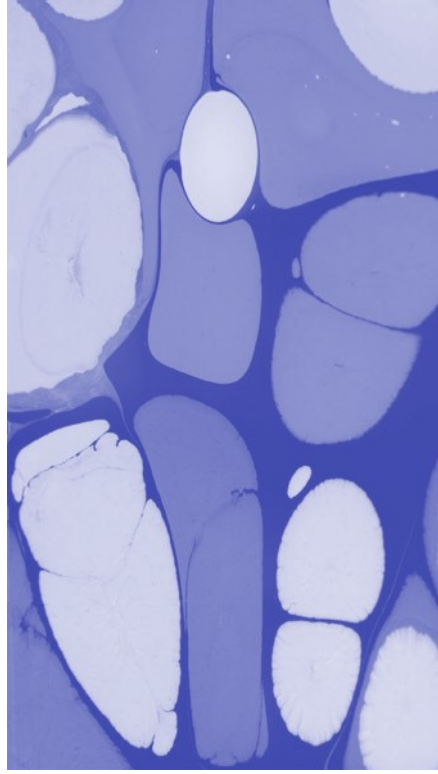
A pockmarked sky, studded with stars and littered with the dust of the Milky Way. Music swells as two planetary bodies glide towards each other. The opening scene of Leonor Serrano Rivas' film *Estrella* (2018) appears to take its cue from its Spanish title, meaning 'star' – also a popular woman's name. A floating cosmos sets the scene; we inhabit a space 'above eye level', where, according to Portuguese poet Gonçalo M Tavares, we find 'the person who hopes that divine elements, | chance and destiny, resolve that which psychology | and instruments are unable to perceive.'¹ Tavares is a frequent reference point for Serrano Rivas and her work often occupies this space 'above eye level', a space she defines as that of the unconscious. In *Estrella*, we find ourselves in the realm of the nocturnal, of the unknowable, of dreams. The second scene cuts to a side view of a tank of water, illuminated in the darkness, like an empty stage that lies still with anticipation before a performance begins. Perhaps that opening sky was in fact the water's surface, its murky membrane offering up an aqueous plane for action to play out.

All is not as it seems in Estrella's world, where one thing quickly becomes another.

1. Gonçalo M. Tavares, *A Voyage to India*, trans. Rhett McNeil, Dalkey Archive Press, 2016, p.38



The first character enters the stage of the tank; a sculptural form is gently lowered into the water by a human hand to the sound of glitching music that swirls as if tracing intergalactic movements. We are back in the world of the cosmos. The form settles on the floor of the tank, as if landing on a planet's surface. Is this creature Estrella herself? The frame switches back to the astrology of the water, now covered by a film of deep blue, red and yellow pigments. White spheres bloom and mutate there. A pulsing rhythm, like a heartbeat, signals a living presence – Estrella again? The following scene returns to the side view of the tank, where a second sculptural form arrives, and then a third. The hand carefully places them in formation, as if arranging three protagonists on stage. In this amorphous, aquatic environment, the fleshy hand seems out of place; it takes on the role of silent puppeteer, a god-like dramatist setting the stage. The three sculptures are almost anthropomorphic; strange creatures with angular, flat planes for bodies and protruding hoops like limbs. Their structural shapes nod towards a playground of architectural forms or stage designs.



Serrano Rivas conceived these peculiar sculptures when researching in the archive of the Teatro Eslava in Madrid, a famed site for avant-garde theatre in the early twentieth century in Spain, particularly during the period in which director Gregorio Martínez Sierra was at

its helm, staging plays by experimental figures including Federico García Lorca, Rafael P. Barradas and Salvador Dalí. Martínez Sierra's book *Un Teatro de Arte en España (1917–1925)* was a primary source for the artist in creating the film Estrella. Serrano Rivas sets out to recompose and re-enact the scenography of the theatre; with sculptures taking the role of fictional versions of set designs found in the Teatro Eslava archive. In this act, the water tank becomes a subconscious stage for the history of the Teatro Eslava, harbouring reimagined memories of the plays that took place there. The water offers up a liminal space for the theatrical imagination, a space where histories are blurred.

Finally, we hear Estrella speak. The water vibrates as a woman's voice whispers, only just audible:

Se dice sin palabras, [...] que es el lenguaje perfecto. Se dice también con la música...
(It is said without words, [...] that is the perfect language. It is said with music...)²

Estrella haunts the water. Her body appears to be absent; her whisper is her only audible presence. Her voice holds history, as does her watery stage. Perhaps she is the body of the water. After all, Estrella is fluid – at once fictional and real. Serrano Rivas encountered her in the archive of the Teatro Eslava; her name derives from that of the publishing house founded by Martínez Sierra – Estrella. In addition, she is a character from a poem by Federico García Lorca, *Madrigal de verano* (Summer Madrigal) (1920). However, the first whispered phrases that we hear are not this particular character's own words; instead they are lifted by Serrano Rivas from another text by Lorca – his first play *El Maleficio de la Mariposa* (*The Butterfly's Evil Spell*) (1920), first also performed at the Teatro Eslava. This symbolist work incorporated music and ballet and only lasted four performances before being cancelled. The script includes frequent references to 'estrellas (stars)':

Through Serrano Rivas' deft manipulation, Estrella becomes an amalgamated being, offering

2. Federico García Lorca, 'El Maleficio de la Mariposa', *Obras Completas*, vol.III, trans. Leonor Serrano Rivas, Aguilar, 1977, p.5.

a channel for several of the lost voices from the fated theatre. She is of the past, yet occupies the present. She exists in a dream state, a blurred space between fantasy and reality. Serrano Rivas' interest in dreams pervades her work; her sources range from Tavares to French sociologist Roger Caillois, whose book *The Dream Adventure* (1963) is a key influence for the artist. Like Serrano Rivas, Caillois is no Freudian; they are both sceptical of the didactic reading of dreams. Caillois critiques the formulaic nature of dream guides, which he charts from as early as ancient Egypt in the Twelfth Dynasty. As a counterpoint, he posits the possibility of entering and exploring the dreamspace itself, describing how 'the dreamer feels himself in the very skin of his nocturnal double, perceiving with his double's eyes, or touching with his hands the other characters in the dream'.³ In Serrano Rivas' film, Estrella is our double. As we enter the sensory dream world of the film, we are submerged in her aqueous space and her voice and heartbeat become ours. Yet she is also the double of specific voices from the Teatro Eslava, drawing them from a historical reality – one which has become obfuscated over time – into a fictional space, where she might also function as the double for a litany of lost women from history. Today, Teatro Eslava is known as Joy Eslava Disco; it has been converted from theatre to nightclub. It seems apt that it is a space for nocturnal doubling, a place of escape. The nightclub offers a stage for dream-like, hallucinatory experiences, just like the body of water in Estrella.

Another scene change and we return to the water's surface, its skin now populated with coloured pigments, their forms swelling and contracting as they interact with each other. It becomes apparent that the sequence is being played in reverse, droplets of colour disappearing and being sucked upwards by some invisible force. Time is skewed in Estrella's world, with no clear linear trajectory. Serrano Rivas studied the craft of marbling paper using water and coloured ink on a residency in Tokyo, using the traditional technique in which ink floats for a few seconds on the surface and then drops. She learned that each coloured ink has a different density, dropping at different speeds and weights;

just like memories, which ebb and flow from us. Here, there

3. Roger Caillois, *The Dream Adventure*, Orion Press, 1963, p.xiii.

is no paper, no tangible surface to receive the swirling patterns. This formless, subconscious world does not demand reality. The drops of coloured ink quickly evaporate from the surface, revealing a dark blue pool that disappears in turn to reveal a milky way of pastel colours in the depths of the water below.

Estrella's voice returns in an excited whisper, enunciating 'la la la la la' with an articulated flourish that marks the next scene change. A drop of ink hits the surface of the water tank, its clear liquid housing the stage of sculptural forms below. The ink begins its descent; as it passes beyond the threshold of the water's surface it transforms into billowing plumes of radiant blue. The form briefly resembles a fantastical aquatic creature, which soon dissolves, the blue pigment spreading like smoke. Estrella is everywhere. The rhythmic delivery of her voice is like an incantation. 'La la la la la'. The phrase is repeated, fading as Estrella's blue presence disperses. Clouds of indigo pigment obfuscate the clear water as it seeps across the stage and around the sculptural forms. It is like the spirit of Estrella has been released into this landscape. Her voice can be heard again:

Estrella, Estrella, Estrella piensa beber
aire, y subir como un globo hasta donde
llega la niebla, y dejarse caer desde allí
(Estrella, Estrella, Estrella aims to drink
air, and rise as a balloon to where the fog
comes, and let herself fall from there)⁴

This self-address is another quote from the archive of Martínez Sierra – this time by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, who lived in Madrid and whose work was performed at the Teatro Eslava. Embodying Darío's words, Estrella rises into the air like the ink droplets on the water's surface, then falls back to the surface and into the body of the water, spreading like fog through its depths. The tank of water is a stage for

Estrella as protagonist, and as she falls she becomes the body of water itself.

4. Rubén Darío, 'Prólogo' in Gregorio Martínez Sierra, *Teatro de Ensayo: Melancólica Sinfonía de Rubén Darío*, trans. Leonor Serrano Rivas, Renacimiento, 1911, pp.11–14.

In her text 'Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water', writer Astrida Neimanis asserts that, 'We are all bodies of water'.⁵ Water connects nature and culture; it is the element that entwines and entangles the human and the natural world. She writes: 'As water, we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: *I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation*'.⁶ Neimanis' description seems fitting for Estrella, this amorphous female character who is at once singular and complex, occupying a specific historical moment while existing fluidly across time. Neimanis argues for a more expansive idea of feminism, which she calls 'hydrofeminism', pushing at the borders of feminist theory and striving to expand it beyond the binaries of sexual difference.⁷

She states: 'We are both materially and semiotically entwined with other bodies of water in a gestating, differentiating and interpermeating relation'.⁸ Neimanis' words are especially resonant at a time in which our planet's waters have been catastrophically polluted and exploited; they also offer a model for thinking about water as a metaphor for fluid notions of time and history. Bodies of water have long held a diversity of histories and stories, from birthing the very earliest life on earth, to hosting mythical cities like Atlantis, to preserving shipwrecks, to engulfing the lost lives of those using bodies of water to flee oppressive regimes. Like the dream adventure proposed by Caillois, water can offer us a space for entanglement and expansion rather than restriction. In Estrella, water acts as a body that holds and complicates memory, that gives life to the entwined voices of women.

As Serrano Rivas' film comes to an end, Estrella's voice gains clarity and volume, as if rising to the surface of the unconscious. She resumes her earlier refrain, extending it:

Se dice sin palabras, [...] que es el lenguaje perfecto. Se dice también con la música, 'que es el ritmo con el que se mueven los Astros.' [...] el habla de lo Desconocido. (It is said without words, [...] that is the perfect language. It is said with music, 'that is the rhythm that moves the stars.' [...] It is the speech of the Unknown.)

Simultaneously, the patterns on the water's murky surface gain clarity as the final stage of the marbling process is revealed on screen. A sheet of paper rolls into the frame, bearing the psychedelic patterns that it has lifted from the pigments waiting on the water's surface. As the paper is peeled back again, it reveals the body of water, its depths permeated with entangled pigments.

In *Estrella*, Serrano Rivas creates an underwater theatre of memories. The tank is unable to contain this aquatic theatre, this aqueous world. Liquid pigments spill onto paper, dissolve into air, seep out of the frame of the camera. Like memories, water morphs, shifts and flows – it is slippery, difficult to grasp and yet always present. In this fluid environment, history is a liquid terrain. A body of water offers an expanded space in which time refuses to move at its regular pace, existing between the real and fictional, the past and present. In *Estrella*, Serrano Rivas generates a space of imagination in which history, lying somewhere between dreaming and waking, is coaxed out of hiding.

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