

Isabel Sandoval

Seeing as the Other

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Klute and Señorita

It's odd to think of a 1970s American paranoia thriller triggering the gender transition and filmmaking journey of a bookish gay kid from a third-world country who came of age in the post-Marcos era. But that's how it happened for me. It didn't happen in the Philippines, where I grew up and got a bachelor's degree in psychology, but a few years after moving to New York City for graduate school. I spent my early teens imagining films and daydreaming plots and characters, but wasn't convinced that filmmaking was a secure career. It was a calling, but not quite a profession. I did take a few film electives at NYU (where I studied business, not film) and enrolled in a summer course that took me to the Cannes Film Festival. For the most part, I was beside myself for having made it at twenty-three years old to New York, the city where movies that mattered were being made. As the mecca of American independent cinema, New York was always my intended destination, and I got high off its energy. Catching an arthouse film at Angelika Film Center or IFC Center between classes made for a productive day. *Last Year at Marienbad*, Ingmar Bergman, Pedro Almodóvar, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* – all these names rolled off my tongue.

In 2008, I came across Bree Daniels, the character played by Jane Fonda in Alan J. Pakula's 1971 neo-noir crime thriller *Klute*, and Bree became a muse and a template. I was captivated by the steely intelligence, the sexual confidence, the lacerating self-awareness, self-possession, and vulnerability masquerading as cynicism – all while wrestling a Pandora's box of demons. Above all, what spoke to me about Bree was her ambivalence – the primordial clash between warring Freudian impulses of self-destruction and preservation, chaos and order.

Bree became my muse for developing female characters that were hard to pin down, or fueled by internal contradictions they can't fully register or control. This ambivalence would become a defining trait of the protagonists of my films, all of whom – perhaps unintentionally – are women. I now believe that art is a product of subterranean forces, like unconscious desires or unresolved personal issues and conflicts, finding outward expression. Torn women, women psychologically split in half, have somehow become my avatars.

In *Klute*, Bree's currency was power: sexual power – as taboo, clandestine and fleeting – over her johns. Power, or at least a certain degree of control, can often rebalance the scales. I felt this in school, for instance, when dominating my peers academically. Around the same time, I noticed how the oversexualization of trans women in Filipino culture stripped them of any

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Olivia navigates a storm of emotions as she slowdances with Alex. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).

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Mirrors and reflections are a visual motif in *Lingua Franca* (2020).

agency or power. For a long time, I didn't consider that I may be trans, since transitioning would mean relinquishing any power or pride I already had. I clearly saw a direct correlation between the extent of one's M to F gender transition and the diminution of one's social status and power. I now realize that I ended up writing my first feature film, *Señorita*, with this in mind.

I wrote the lead character of *Señorita*, Donna, as, first of all, a sex worker. I wanted her to leverage her body – for which Catholic society outcasts her – for economic power, however meager, in order to thrive in a capitalist setting. But I went further, writing Donna as a political double agent using the money of her morally corrupt VIP client against his own interests. Not only does Donna regain a modicum of power; she also pulls one over on society and the powers that be, going behind their backs. It's tempting to dismiss someone like Donna, yet, ironically, she and I both draw our power through subterfuge. This notion of deception informs my perspective as a trans filmmaker in the US, where at every given opportunity I'm made to grapple with how marginalized I am. As Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*: "All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive."¹

Jane Fonda demolished the cinematic trope of the "hooker with a heart of gold" when she played Bree Daniels in *Klute*. Released in 1971, the film's female character seemed shockingly modern and complex compared to how popular Filipino films in the 1990s and 2000s portrayed women – especially trans women, in whatever negligible screen time they got. This led me to read more about Fonda, her career, and her political trajectory since the late 1960s and early '70s. I've always identified with women, particularly those who challenge patriarchal notions of gender roles or conventional femininity – even more so in a neurotically Catholic country like the Philippines, with its celebrated passivity and "nice-ness." My identification with the Bree/Jane persona – one is inseparable from the other in my mind – became profound and personal as I gravitated toward a more anarchic expression of femininity.

The sense of self-recognition in Bree reminded me of an Audre Lorde interview by Adrienne Rich. Lorde says the first reason for her own writing was a need to say things she couldn't say otherwise, and that she couldn't find other poems saying.² One such poem did exist for me in cinema, and that was Bree/Jane. She was my thought finding an articulation – not merely of the characters I wanted to write, but an articulation of the kind of woman I myself could be. More than that, she made me want to be an

actress and play her in a film that I would write and direct myself.

Around the same time, I was browsing YouTube channels where trans people documented their transition at different stages of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), encompassing a diverse swath of races, professions, and personality types. I found myself grappling with the same questions on gender identity they were living out in a public forum. There seemed to be only one way to be a trans woman in the Philippines, at least according to local media: a kind of hyperfeminized, scatterbrained, boy-chasing Barbie-wannabe, a caricature of femininity. By contrast, the people I was watching showed that there's no single way to express and embody the gender you transition to. I can be a woman of my own design and creation. My "eureka" moment was realizing that I wasn't transitioning to become a woman, but to becoming more fully myself, and I happen to be a woman. It was then that I gave myself permission to transition.

I wanted to test the waters first. I had never cross-dressed before, save for one Halloween or two. It was the nudge I needed to finally dip my toes into filmmaking. *Señorita* transposed Bree Daniels from 1971 to 2008, and from New York to Cebu in the Philippines. It's the lead-up to a fraught mayoral election in Cebu. As the protagonist of *Señorita*, Donna is, like Bree, an escort. Unlike Bree, she is trying to quit and start a new life. And unlike Bree, she is a trans woman. *Señorita* is more noirish and overtly political than *Klute*. Donna realizes that the corrupt town mayor who seeks reelection in her hometown is a crony of her affluent VIP client in the big city.

Bristling at her past catching up to her, Donna decides to resume her arrangement with this client (using her professional name, Sofia) and secretly funnels her fees to the campaign of the mayor's underdog opponent. Donna/Sofia plays with power. The stakes are higher, more operatic. The danger she courts is more systematically menacing. She's up against an entire political party/infrastructure/mafia, while Bree's conflicts were more interior and private. *Señorita* is a mangled, Fauvist impression of *Klute*, rough-edged and mannered in the shadows of *Klute*'s sleekness and clinicality. One would be hard-pressed to say that one influenced the other, since they don't share much more than the haunted id driving them.

I played Donna/Sofia, on top of my off-screen duties as writer and director. I slipped into her skin, and into her Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde bifurcation as she navigated two incongruous realities. As much of a performance as it was – I spent two hours on makeup every morning to look like my character – it felt nothing like a lie.



Nostalgia. Olga fondly recalls her past life to Olivia. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).

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A room of her own. Olivia performs her intimate rituals behind closed doors. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).

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Sisterly ardor. Two Filipina transwomen get spiritual. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).

And yet, my third film, *Lingua Franca* (2019), honors *Klute* more maturely and profoundly than *Señorita* does. *Señorita*'s conflicts are directed outward, while *Lingua Franca*'s are internal. The premise of *Lingua Franca* is deceptive: though on paper it seems like a textbook social-realist drama – urgent, likely didactic, performatively indignant – it is actually a delicate, quiet, and impressionistic film, embodied by its protagonist Olivia's sensual fantasy scene, where we inhabit the character and experience her emotional state immediately and intimately. Bree's sharp intelligence and sense of power in the scenes with her therapist were the most eye-opening to me. Her cold, unforgiving self-awareness and her clarity, her baser impulses, made a woman whose profession ostensibly makes her an object (of her johns' sexual desires and of derision by society in general) emerge as an active subject – an agent. The power of Fonda's performance, as well as Pakula's direction and Gordon Willis's salacious lensing, blew through the second-class-citizen status of Bree's character and made her a flesh-and-blood force you can't look away from. With none of this agency apparent in Philippine films and media featuring trans characters, *Klute* gave me a blueprint for making a film (and writing a character) as an antidote.

Power in "Otherness"

I found my power in being an individual, and even reveling in being the "other." To some degree, I may have romanticized the status of being a keeper of arcane, secret knowledge indecipherable to the masses: a privilege rather than a deficiency. Behind the scenes, I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist. I didn't want to be patronized or coddled, or have my work as a "minority" filmmaker handled with kid gloves. Sentimentality is a crutch many filmmakers use to elicit empathy: easily likable characters, textbook "heroes" who are morally upright yet uncomplicated make it easy for audiences to connect with your work, especially when you're regarded as the "other." That all felt like a compromise to me.

I never thought being the "other" was a bad thing. On the contrary, where people tended to see subjugation and marginalization, I reveled in the potential for subterfuge. A film artist needs seductive powers – the sense of elusiveness and unknowability that comes with genuinely being an individual. To know me – and my characters – is to play with a matryoshka without a guarantee that you'll get through every layer of my protagonists by the end of the story. My women characters tend to be an acquired taste for that reason. They're not begging for love or sympathy. They can seem remote. The aura of mystery is their protective shield against emotional

vulnerability and physical danger. By that standard, you might say I'm a coquette or a tease.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera writes, "Flirtation is a promise of sexual intercourse without a guarantee."³ One vital epiphany I had while making *Lingua Franca* was that art, and therefore cinema, regardless of message or aesthetics, is erotic desire sublimated. We judge a film the way we judge sex, by how it navigates the escalation from tension (conflict) and buildup to release (climax). One could call my approach with *Lingua Franca* "edging." I steer the audience to a proverbial resolution and then let go.

The lack of clear and easy resolution can be polarizing; it can be the equivalent of cinematic blue-balling. But I'm merely shifting gears from a male orgasm to a fundamentally female one. The film's climax – the morning-after scene in the motel room – isn't linear or concentrated or external, but diffuse and subterranean. It doesn't facilitate emotional catharsis in the expected or "satisfying" way, which makes it work for viewers who relish the challenge of the seeming inconclusiveness. By retaining a certain enigmatic "not-giving-it-all-up" to the audience, I leave them wanting more and hold power over them. For Donna in *Señorita* and Olivia in *Lingua Franca*, when their respective narratives conclude, their trajectories remain uncertain and their fates haunt and linger in the minds of the viewers that connected with them.

In an early draft of my new feature *Tropical Gothic* – where a native Filipina priestess psychologically manipulates a Spanish colonizer to avenge her dispossession – she bristles as a Spanish historian orders her to name objects by their native terms, which he will then translate into Spanish. The less of me the audience has figured out, the more power I have over them. But more recently, having released *Lingua Franca* internationally and somehow proven myself, I feel less of a need to be strident and confrontational, especially when it becomes performative. Come to think of it, there is nothing wrong with taking a more straightforward route to eliciting empathy for my characters and allowing a natural charisma or likability to emerge.

Another new feature script I'm working on is a present-day romance set in Los Angeles between two college-educated immigrants of color who resort to the gig economy during a recession. It feels very Ken Loach in its unsparing honesty about the economic anxieties of the working class. The female lead is trans, a matter that barely comes up in the film even as a plot point (as in *Lingua Franca*). She's plucky, genial, and less guarded than my former heroines,

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Olivia goes out on an errand in Brighton Beach. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).



Looking out the car window, Olivia ponders an uncertain future. Film still from the movie *Lingua Franca* (2020).

recalling female leads in quintessential James L. Brooks films. Compared to my previous work, the trans woman as Everywoman feels genuinely radical.

I'm curious to see how fully and deeply I can imbue my "other" lead with an Everywoman relatability that she can ultimately use to overtake and embody the worldview of the "self" in a predominantly cis, white, male world. It's a pivot for me from a demonstrative "othering" of myself to having my "otherness" replace the norm to become the "self." Think of how mainstream culture has looked past the color of Toni Morrison's or James Baldwin's skin to find a moral compass for America in their words.

Trans Fem Aesthetics

I don't consider trans fem aesthetics to be heterogeneous or monolithic. As a sensibility, I consider it nascent and recent. At this point, an overwhelming majority of cinema about the trans experience and featuring trans characters is made by cisgender filmmakers who tend to be male. The fixation on the gender transition process in most of these films betrays cis directors' superficial insight into what it means to be trans and the leery exoticizing and sensationalizing of the trans body undergoing physical transformation.

I regard the more immediate priority of trans film artists to be to correct cis interpretations of the trans experience. I do this in *Lingua Franca* by first shifting the focus from gender transition to life post-transition. The mundanity of the morning rituals of Olivia – an undocumented Filipina trans caregiver – can come across as radical during a fraught time like that of the Trump administration. Secondly, the premise of *Lingua Franca* could be your textbook social-issue drama where the trans woman is subjected to physical violence – a common trope seen in another recent drama about a trans woman of color made by a cis director. I don't resort to physical violence in the film. The violence is emotional and psychological, the kind experienced not exclusively by trans women, but also in all relationships in which there is a power difference. And there's a lot of it between Olivia and Alex, the cis man who takes an interest in her: race, gender, citizenship status.

Beyond that, I can only be faithful to the idea of a trans fem aesthetic in my own work by keeping it authentic. That is, by refusing to submit to external pressures or interests that might either dilute its specificity or compromise its rawness. I'm keenly aware that I'm not making art in a vacuum. Its creation is shaped and influenced by economic and logistical factors, among others. Pragmatism dictates that I can only have a financially sustainable career as a

feature filmmaker if my work appeals to a certain audience size. The bigger my production budget for a given project, the bigger the commercial appeal needs to be. I attempted to strike a precarious balance with *Lingua Franca*, and I'd like to think I was successful. Its admittedly arthouse sensibility is distinct enough for international critics and audiences to identify me as some kind of auteur, which brought validation by the Venice International Film Festival, Cahiers Du Cinema, the Criterion Collection, and Ava DuVernay, among others.

The film is also accessible enough to engage a general audience, albeit a more adventurous and discerning one. It resonated with industry gatekeepers enough for me to be represented by a reputable Hollywood talent agency and for the first TV series I pitched to be acquired for development by a major cable channel. *Lingua Franca* set me up in my career to continue making work that I'm passionate about and be fairly compensated. Authenticity in content – my thematic interests – will continue to be a priority. Jean Cocteau said that directors make the same movie over and over again. They're inevitably drawn to the same themes, dilemmas, and unresolved conflicts. It's only the style, the form that changes. This is very true in my own work, where I gravitate toward morally complicated women with secrets, and who find themselves making important personal choices in a fraught sociopolitical milieu.

There is power in secrets, in being the keeper of a knowledge that others don't have. I can't say that my predilection for secrets is characteristically trans, but it is most certainly my thing (and if there's one genre custom-made for me, it would be noir). In *Señorita*, there are two key secrets: Donna's double life as escort Sofia, and her scheme to get an underdog elected in her adopted town. In my second feature, *Apparition* (which doesn't have trans characters and is set in a monastery), a cloistered nun secretly attends political rallies during the Marcos era. In *Lingua Franca*, Olivia conceals being both undocumented and trans from Alex, which he discovers on separate occasions.

The moment a secret is revealed, the transitory power it once afforded its holder dissipates, and nominal power dynamics – determined by race, gender, and citizenship status – are restored, which, in *Lingua Franca*, easily favor Alex. Olivia's motivations for nondisclosure are reasonable – self-preservation and physical safety – and more morally defensible than Donna in *Señorita*, who is not above relishing the sadistic delight of bamboozling the politically powerful.

I'm probably more of a Donna than Olivia in

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navigating the US film industry in my career post-*Lingua Franca*. I fashion myself as an illusionist with an assortment of tricks up my sleeve – an idea, a certain stylistic flourish, an unexpected revelation about a character – to keep things unpredictable and surprising. That means I won't be making another film similar to *Lingua Franca* in temperament or narrative, at least not anytime soon. The projects I'm developing are either more stylistically exuberant or extremely austere, which keeps Isabel-Sandoval-the-filmmaker in constant flux.

I never wanted to be defined or encapsulated by one particular facet or aspect of myself. My choices in fictional characters or career moves are fueled by a personal crusade against being seen and treated as primarily or exclusively one thing – trans, Filipino, person of color, or a woman – and in favor of being seen fully as myself. In that light, it might be instructive to say that my trans fem aesthetics is influenced by my rebellion against what I consider to be the restrictive nature of the idea.

My mandate now becomes to seduce a wider and broader audience and get them to emotionally connect with my work. That means adopting a more accessible yet striking filmmaking grammar and aesthetic sensibility. That's the defining feature of director Jordan Peele and his commentary on race: sly, subversive politics slipped into pop-culture confection. That is how I plan on centering my perspective as the "other" and making it not only legitimate, but essential: my own contribution to an ongoing cultural revolution.

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Isabel Sandoval is a trans Filipina auteur based in the United States. The Museum of Modern Art has recognized Sandoval as "a rarity among the young generation of Filipino filmmakers." Sandoval has made three dramatic features, including Sandoval's latest, the Brooklyn-set immigration drama *Lingua Franca*, which she wrote, directed, produced, edited, and starred in. In 2019, Sandoval became the first transgender director to compete at the Venice International Film Festival in 76 years. Sandoval recently directed the 21st entry in the acclaimed MIU MIU Women's Tales, *Shangri-La*, which previously commissioned Agnes Varda, Lucrecia Martel, Ava DuVernay, Miranda July, and Lynne Ramsay. Sandoval is currently in development on her fourth and most ambitious feature, *Tropical Gothic*, which won the VFF Talent Highlight Award at the 2021 Berlinale Co-Production Market. Her first two features, *Señorita* and *Apparition*, will debut on streaming on the Criterion Channel in April 2021.

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1
Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Ixia
Press, 2019), 31.

2
Adrienne Rich, "An Interview
with Audre Lorde," *Signs* 6, no. 4
(Summer 1981).

3
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable
Lightness of Being* (Harper
Perennial, 2009), 142.

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