

The Transformative Powers of Education: An Interview With THE FACULTIES' Director Eloísa Solaas

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By Alonso Aguilar

In one of the most iconic and self-reflective moments of *The Faculties / Las facultades*, Argentine director Eloísa Solaas' acclaimed documentary feature, a pompous law professor tells his students that "common speech should stay beyond Figueroa Alcorta (street)." To this academic, once someone crosses the symbolic gateway into university grounds and becomes enclosed behind the prestigious walls of a center for higher-learning (like the University of Buenos Aires) they transcend their status as "regular folk." Now they are students, aspiring professionals, and emerging voices in their fields, and they better start "acting like it."

No matter how outdated and patronizing that line of thought may be, those kinds of expectations are deeply ingrained in the foundations of most academic institutions, and as such, have a direct impact on the precocious minds submitting themselves to this process of social and professional validation. With its intimate frames, immersive use of sound, and almost ethnographic approach towards human behavior, *The Faculties* registers the gestures and mannerisms of a diverse group of students going through their final oral exams (as is the tradition in Argentina), and dissects the extent to which their identities are molded by the so-called "student experience."

As her film is currently playing stateside through November 27 at Film at Lincoln Center's [Art of the Real showcase](#), Eloísa Solaas spoke with TropicalFRONT about her breakthrough documentary.

One of the most notable aspects of The Faculties is how tangible the students' tension and self-doubt is. How did you define the ways in which you were going to represent these inner processes cinematically?

I originally came up with the idea for a fiction short I was working on. I wanted to end it with someone doing an exam. From there, I began thinking about better ways to frame the story, how I could work with the background... Later I realized I wasn't really interested in giving someone a script with the contents of a class. I thought it was way more authentic to have a student who was actually going through that process. The next step was embracing my desire to see an exam happening in real time, with the excitement of not knowing the outcome.

Once I decided I was going for a documentary, I wanted to distance myself and the camera from the situations. I didn't want any talking head interviews or voice-over, I wanted to keep the sense of wonder of fiction; make the students forget about the camera. Sometimes I even left the camera unattended and let the scene flow naturally. These exams are public affairs, but they are also deeply personal experiences, so I wanted to respect that.



By itself, the way you frame bodies in these enclosed spaces already speaks about the power structures and sense of authority inherent to these exams. Did you work that out beforehand or did it come up while watching the scenes develop?

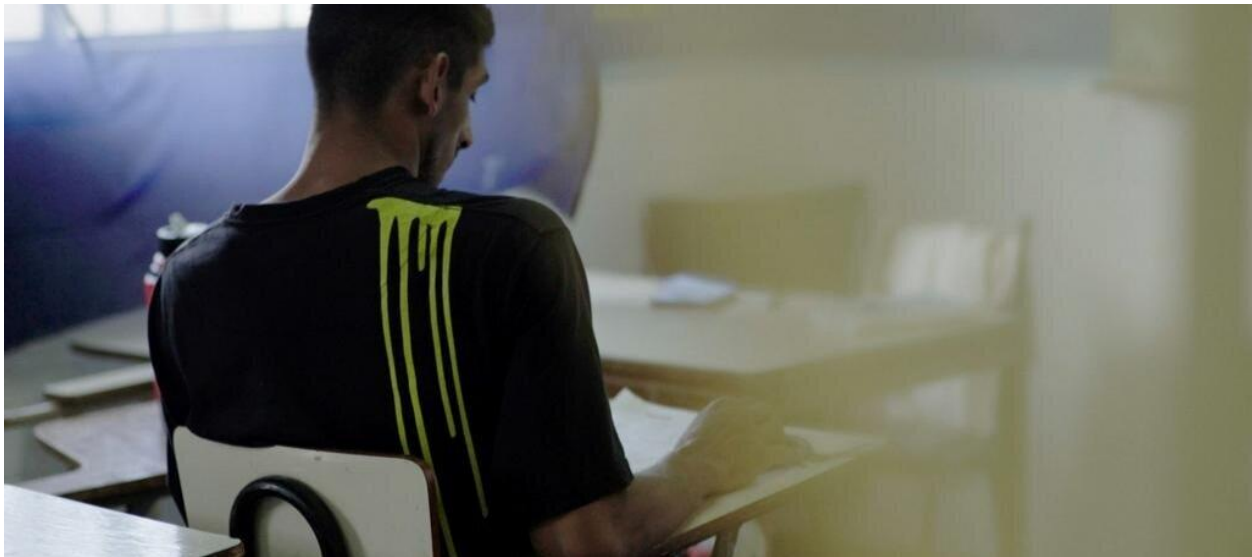
I began with a very strict premise where I didn't want the teachers to be seen. Eventually I let that go, because I saw other possibilities that arose. The teachers' corporal gestures are sometimes really interesting, but I knew my focus was on the students; everything that happens in the mind and the body of someone who is put in the spotlight and intellectually exposed.

The only example where I saw the teacher as a natural fit was in the law exam, because the setting itself is that of a mock trial; in a way, even he is a performer there. The same goes for the architecture exam, where there's a more horizontal approach that I wanted to differentiate. The subject and the educational model ended up determining the specifics of each frame, but I was committed to having the film lay with the student's gestures and corporeality.

*Now that you mention these differences, there's a scene where Jonathan, the sociology student at the penitentiary center, goes on about the typology behind people in jail. What would happen if one were to use that same approach with institutions of higher education? When you structured *The Faculties* was there a conscious attempt to portray different types of students?*

Universities are huge entities. Each career probably has its own typology. I decided to include many branches of education, as I wanted to see what happened when they were put right next to each other in the editing process. There's always something charming in those first experiences with the area you're probably going to be linked with for the rest of your life; people tend to overcompensate and create characters for themselves.

The criteria was composed of the many ideas I had and restricted by the options given us in real life, because many people we approached didn't want to be filmed. Even I would've been hesitant, I think [laughs]. More than an idea of typology, I just wanted diversity. Public universities in Argentina have a predominantly middle to upper-middle class demographic, but there are also other faces there, and I also wanted them to be part of the portrait I was developing. I'm talking about those who see education as a gateway to opportunity. I tried to show different realities, from social standing to gender, and also different ways to work around the exams, from rhetorical questions to humor. I really wanted to have a varied repertoire that showcased the universality of this experience.



I see language as one of the conceptual mainstays of the film; how, within academic life, it tends to mutate into something almost performative, linked with the idea of how one's supposed to portray a "university student." How integral was that idea to developing the film's structure?

For me that is also one of the main themes of the movie. I didn't really know if it was going to emerge. Whenever I listened to people from other areas of study speak, or even looked at their class programs, it was very clear that they had their own specific codes of language, that even they didn't really fully understand at times. There's something to say about how language forms us; how our repertoire of vocabulary is directly proportional to some possibilities, and that also refers to our identity. When people graduate, they don't "work as a lawyer", they "are lawyers." I was deeply interested in that appropriation process and how those codes and logics end up forging a different version of ourselves.

In the film there are moments when the topics and theories discussed by the students seem to reflect on the film itself. There are mentions of Bazin's realism, Durkheim's social structures, Bajtin and language, etc. What was your relationship with the contents of these exams? Did you consider them in any way when editing?

That was actually one of the objectives I had. I discarded a lot of exams because even if they had fun moments, they were extremely specific. It worked better to have these general notions of Bazin, realism, and ontology instead of talks about Spanish cinema in the Franco regime, for example. I wanted to build bridges between greater topics, make it feel like one person's exam could also be addressing other ones. I also wanted the audience to engage with the ideas put forward by the students, so they could create their own opinions and in some way dialogue with the faces on screen without the need to be an expert.

I also wanted to focus on tensions. Not only because of the exams and how nerve-wracking they are, but also because of the role of teachers, and the idea of exams themselves. I didn't want to give my own conclusions, but rather portray these structural tensions in a way that the spectator could make their own.

Talking about conclusions...the film has a very loose structure, so how did you define when it needed to end?

I had a very free flowing approach to the script, so in the middle of the filming process I had the idea to integrate Jonathan's prison release. That led to me wondering about his life and his studies beyond the sociology classes. I felt that I needed to record that first class he took as a free man. I don't think cinema has the power to transform the grand social structures, but there's real weight to representation and recording. Being in front of a camera changes relationships and behaviors. I know some might see Jonathan's arc as an outlier compared to the rest of the film's tone and form. I understand that — here I'm showing my hand a little bit in terms of what I believe. I do see education as a means towards political intervention, and to me that has more value than adhering to a format.

Are some of those concerns still looming in your mind? Filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman have made careers out of portraying public institutions and their relationship with individuals, are you in some way interested in continuing to deal with these kinds of powers and registers?

I like how documentaries treat their material as a unique piece. They respect reality. I love all of Wiseman's work, but at the same time, I began this process with the idea of a fiction script where the exam was just a side note. I think I'm now going back to that... trying to work my head around writing a fiction story, but there's always these enclosed worlds that appear and fascinate me. Right now I'm creating a character very linked to the finance and economic world, and I see how I've immersed myself in that beyond my original intention. Sometimes you let yourself loose and the project transforms into something altogether different. I can't tell you that I've cracked the code like Wiseman did, going from town to town exploring institutions. My experience was quite different. I don't know what could come next... I guess I'm still on the lookout.

Well, the lines between fiction and documentary have been blurred in the last couple of decades. Do you work differently when considering each approach?

I believe that whichever process one selects, there should always be a place for the unexpected. Even when working with actors and going always by the script, strokes of genius or inspirations might come from unintended places. There's always a place for contingency. I believe that. For me cinema has a responsibility with the tangential world. Streets, people, backgrounds... I don't like the auteurist ideas of total control and tightly constructed sets. As a director, one has to accept that control is not always possible, and work from that premise. There's real excitement in not knowing the outcome of the scene, what colors might appear or how it will look. At least I need that exploration.

You have to think how to arrange reality according to what you're delving into and always consider and be ready for when the unexpected presents itself.

Alonso Aguilar is a cultural journalist from San José, Costa Rica. He does editorial labor in *Krinógrafo: Cine y Crítica* and his writings have featured in *Mubi Notebook*, *Bandcamp Daily*, *Film International*, *photogénie*, *Cinema Year Zero*, Costa Rica Festival Internacional de Cine, *La Nación* and *Revista Correspondencias*.