

FILM

CONTINENTAL GRIFT

January 31, 2021 • Gilda Williams on Amalia Ulman's *El Planeta* (2021)



Amalia Ulman, *El Planeta*, 2021, DCP, black-and-white, sound, 79 minutes. Leonor and María (Amalia Ulman and Ale Ulman).

EL PLANETA, billed as “a comedy about eviction” and the first feature film by artist Amalia Ulman, is loosely based on the real-life Spanish mother-daughter petty-crime duo Justina and Ana Belén. Arrested in 2012, the penniless yet elegant pair posed as wealthy ladies and scammed countless restauranteurs and shop-owners—who’d trusted the apparently well-heeled women to eventually settle their bill—out of thousands of euros. In *El Planeta*, lead actor Ulman (who also wrote the screenplay) plays fashion student Leonor who, in the aftermath of her father’s death, can no longer afford her London university and is forced to return to her seaside hometown, the drizzly and geriatric Gijón (where the Belén family also resided). Leo awaits news about an uncertain scholarship with mother María (the director’s real-life mother, Ale Ulman), who’s inherited from her late husband only debts and a looming eviction from their cramped Gijón apartment.

“El Planeta” is the name of a restaurant where Leo and María eventually grift a meal, posing as close friends of the mayor, but the title seems mostly to allude to the film’s symbolic locale: Planet Poverty. Resigned and resourceful, both women have adapted to this Planet’s demands, expertly raising an iPhone just so, like an antenna, to catch their neighbor’s Wi-Fi; remembering to send clothes back within the thirty-day return period; grooming to pass as middle class. They cope bravely as their meager amenities—food, heating, electricity—vanish one by one. With their apartment now steeped in darkness, Leo patiently interrupts her reading on the communal stairway to get up and switch back on the hall-light, when it

repeatedly times out. María—all fur coat, dark glasses and blonde Anna Wintour bob—maintains a veneer of bourgeois respectability even when caught shoplifting. The pair drain the fag end of a “borrowed” credit card to splurge at a department store beauty counter rather than squander funds on, say, groceries and bills.

Hailed as “the first great Instagram artist” in 2016, the Argentinian-born, Spanish-raised, UK-educated, US-based Ulman rocketed to art-world fame with her web-based *Excellences & Perfections*, performing a young woman’s online rise and fall and rise to a rapt and believing Instagram audience back in 2014. The artist’s distinct brand of hyper-stylish, youthful glamour translates seamlessly to the big screen as she revisits themes of faking it and social class. Ulman is a born star, an expressive and mysterious object of desire blessed with endearing vulnerability, an unreal beauty suggestive of Disney’s Snow White, and stupendous dress sense. *Excellences & Perfections*’s chameleonic ability to conjure webgenic ideals of femininity is here replayed in Leo’s willingness to repackage herself as required. She attempts sex work, but her awkward rendezvous at a cheap cafe with a would-be john (Nacho Vigalondo) quickly slams into a dead-end: She’d read online to expect 500€; his estimate for an extramarital quickie hovers in the humiliating 20€ region. Communication does not improve with Amadeus (Zhou Chen), the handsome cashier at her local discount store, despite their instant bond over a mutual past in faraway, longed-for London. Their encounter too ends abruptly and deplorably—although an earlier scene, which sees a vodka-swiggling Leo prepping for her romantic date while dancing with abandon in the mirror, is sheer delight: a rare, brief season of joy on this Planet, however lonely and narcissistic. Both women rarely smile, except in selfies.

All the men—whether potential clients, lovers, or employers—are uniformly irredeemable, forever greeting Leo with their undisguised disappointment over her recent haircut. When possible new boyfriend Amadeus holds Leo’s face in his hands in a patronizing gesture, Leo immediately does the same to him, insinuating that she’ll treat him exactly as he treats her. Yet despite apparently being well-versed in gender equality and, it seems, brainier than everybody else, Leo watches the men around her come out on top every time. It comes as no surprise that the recent death of beloved cat Holga reduces the women to sobs, whereas Dad is never mourned.

El Planeta’s lush black-and-white cinematography recalls the neorealist style of early Jim Jarmusch, whose characters’ ennui seems to seep into their drab surroundings. Back in the 1980s, Jarmusch’s movies startlingly introduced long empty stretches of precious screen time, carelessly tossed away while “nothing happened.” *El Planeta* too has multiple uneventful scenes, lingering a beat or two longer than necessary. Here, Ulman expertly equates wasted movie footage with the valueless days of the unemployed women, who are often pictured killing time: María deep-cleaning the apartment she’s on the verge of losing forever, Leo distractedly window-shopping streets lined with boarded shops and garish bargain stores.

Filed in the fall of 2019, *El Planeta* inadvertently reveals how much 2020’s homebound isolation was underway long before “quarantine” became a staple in our active vocabulary. Thrown into constant togetherness by circumstance, the women seem only safe at home—free from suspicious shop assistants, ungenerous men, racks of unaffordable things. The pair are enduring an almost prophetic, lockdown-like in-between time: Leo, waiting to resume school; María, whiling away the hours before commencing her last-ditch “retirement plan”: jail.

Recalling Yang Mingming’s claustrophobic mother-daughter portrait, *Girls Always Happy* (2018), *El Planeta* evokes an Iberian *Grey Gardens* (1975), minus the high-society relations—a film parallel reinforced when María turns up on the sofa wearing an elaborate beaded headband that instantly conjures Little Edie’s trademark headscarves. Like East Hampton’s Big and Little Edie, the mother-daughter pair are stranded on a forgotten edge of the Atlantic, seemingly waiting for a ship that will never come in. Small events unfold in an atmosphere of inevitable doom; like Leo’s reading session on the stairs outside their cold apartment door, it’s only a matter of time before everything goes dark.

—*Gilda Williams*

El Planeta premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 30.