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**THE FILMS OF LUCRECIA MARTEL**

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The undersigned have examined the thesis entitled: **The Films of Lucrecia Martel** (presented by Edgar Ortiz, a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts - Cinema and Digital Media - Directing) and hereby certify that it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that this master's thesis, on the topic **The Films of Lucrecia Martel** was developed independently under the expert guidance of my supervisor, using the literature and sources cited in this work.

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## ABSTRACT: THE FILMS OF LUCRECIA MARTEL

This thesis is a study on New Argentine Cinema director Lucrecia Martel. It analyzes her work so far by discussing her feature films relative to their narrative, aural, visual and thematic components. Lucrecia Martel explains that she constructs her films by “layering” narrative and emotional content. This thesis will analyze what this statement means. Through these elements, the thesis attempts to characterize Martel's unique qualities as an auteur by paying particular attention to the elements of film grammar, such as sound and image design, which she uses to convey relevant plot information and to create meaningful metaphors that expand the image-space. The thesis will contribute to the relatively little written in English on Lucrecia Martel.

## ABSTRAKT: FILMY LUCRECII MATELU

Tato práce se zabývá dílem režisérky Lucrecie Martelové, představitelky současného argentinského filmu. Její celovečerní filmy analyzuje z hlediska narativního, auralního, vizuálního a tematického. Martelová tvrdí, že při výstavbě svých filmů užívá principu “vrstvení” narativního a emocionálního obsahu a práce zkoumá, co toto tvrzení skutečně znamená. Pomocí těchto elementů charakterizuje jedinečné autorské kvality Martelové. Zvláštní důraz je kladen na gramatiku filmového jazyka, zvuk a obraz, kterých filmařka užívá ke sdělení relevantních informací o dějové linii a k vytvoření smysluplných metafor. Tato práce přispívá k relativně malému množství anglicky psané literatury o Lucrecii Martelové.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Lucrecia Martel was born in 1966 to a middle class family in the province of Salta, Argentina. She studied at the Avellaneda Experimental School (AVEX) and the National experimentation filmmaking school (ENERC) in Buenos Aires and is often categorized as one of the founders of the New Argentinian Cinema of the late 90s and early 00s. Her first feature *The Swamp* (*La Ciénaga*, 2001), and her follow up films *The Holy Girl* (*La Niña Santa*, 2004) and *The Headless Woman* (*La Mujer Sin Cabeza*, 2008) constitute the body of work analyzed in this thesis. These films are set in the Salta region, the northern most province of Argentina. This is a fact of key importance when proceeding on an in-depth reading of Martel's filmography. In fact this geographical specificity informs every aspect of the films. Oscar Jubis (2009, p.7), argues that Martel's work constitutes a trilogy, or as he calls it "The Salta Trilogy". Martel herself repeatedly mentions the importance of her home province in her cinema, which she describes as strongly autobiographical. In an interview for the Gulbenkian Institute she admits that everything in her films is "stolen from everyday life", the situations, the events, the dialogue, and the characters. They all stem from her own experiences growing up in Salta. Her films, however, go beyond memoir. They are stark, poignantly critical analyzes of provincial life, particularly the Salta middle class. Martel herself claims she had a "happy upbringing". During her formative years oral storytelling was always present thanks to her grandmother, a key experience that later would influence her cinema. In particular she observes that, at the time of producing her first film, *The Swamp*, she had little experience with film narration. It was on her knowledge of oral narration, its cadence, tone and emphasis that she relied on to guide her through her first feature film. Martel believes that cinema is too often made "from the cinema" and that it should first and foremost come from "the observation of life itself". Because of this she doesn't list many films and directors as having an influence on her work. She does however recognize the importance of Westerns



and B- horror movies of the 50s, 60s and 70s. She repeatedly refers to the titles of her films as fitting titles for horror films.

Despite having studied at both AVEX and ENERC, Martel argues that her experience of film school was limited. Neither did she complete her studies in either school. Her short film *Dead King* (*Rey Muerto*, 1995) is a revenge story, also set in Salta. It follows a working-class woman as she goes on a vendetta against her male abusers. Martel herself has claimed that the short was heavily influenced by the Western genre. She describes the film as a school of its own, yet she has distanced herself from this early attempt at cinema narration and in multiple occasions she expresses her discontent with it, describing it as “a naive attempt”. However it is possible to glean, even from this early film, some of the themes and interests that would evolve into her features. Identifying these defining characteristics is the main objective of this thesis. But first it is important to provide a context from where she stems.

Lucrecia Martel and her films come out of a long tradition of national cinema. One that has, from its very beginnings, been characterized by a tendency towards self-analysis and an awareness of its specific national identity. As such it's rather fitting that the first Argentine film, made in 1897, was a shot of the Argentine flag waving in the “Plaza de Mayo”. It marked the beginning of a long affair with the 7th art. Early Argentine cinema, in similar fashion to the rest of the world, turned to its own history, literature and folk tradition for inspiration. Then in 1914, *Amelia*, the country's first feature lit up the screens with a story of an aristocratic family. A century later Martel would bring to the screen another story of a family in decline, with *The Swamp*. This section offers an overview of Argentine film history and how it influenced Martel's films.

## Overview of Argentinian Film History

With the introduction of sound in 1929, and particularly thanks to the Movitone technology, Argentina's cinema industry entered a golden age that would last 20 years. With the advent of synch sound. The Tango was able to burst into the cinema, giving rise to countless film/music stars like Carlos Gardel, Luis Sandrini and Mecha Ortiz. The early sound classics like *Muñequitas Porteñas* and *Alma de Bandoneon* all shared stories that featured a poor class poor protagonist and wealthy antagonists. These films set the ground work for populism in cinema, in which the poor are ennobled and the rich are vilified. This theme of class struggle would continue to dominate the screens throughout the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, eventually defining the third cinema of the 60s and would influence the films of the socially conscious and critical New Argentine cinema. Martel's films are also influenced by this tradition, and deal heavily with class division, specifically the middle class and its power relationship with the lower class. Martel however, does not portray stereotypical characters. She invests in developing complex characters that exhibit a range of emotions and behavior. This provides her characterizations with vastly richer meaning than the pauper and the rich man depictions of the Tango films of the 30s and 40s.

In the 50s a new generation of filmmakers drifted from the Tango musicals and fairytale cinema of the golden age and began producing politically and socially involved cinema. Amongst these new directors were Fernando Ayala, David Jose Kohon, Octavio Getino and Fernando "Pino" Solanas. Their ideas of cinema's function in society would lead to the "Grupo de Liberacion" in the 60s and the notion of Third Cinema.

In the early 60s, Solanas and Getino proclaimed their idea of Third Cinema. They believed that there were three types of cinema. Where the first was dedicated to pure entertainment (mainstream Hollywood) and the second dealt with the auteur and the expression of individuality

(European Art cinema), the third cinema, they believed, was to be a force of social change, a cinema to educate, enlighten and instigate change. The key film of the movement was the 1968 documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La Hora de los Hornos*), co-directed by Solanas and Getino. In this documentary/ film essay the filmmakers addressed the Latin American problem as an historical process. The film was shown to worker groups and paused between segments in order to discuss the on screen topics. Originally intended as a piece to influence the working class and bring about a social revolution, the film was a thought provoking experiment of cinema as a social force for liberation and has been called the paradigm of revolutionary activist cinema by BFI Sight and Sound (2012). Decades later, the New Argentinian Cinema directors, Martel amongst them, would be influenced by the social cinema of the 60s and create a cinema that is neither just entertainment, nor only an exposé of authorial aesthetics but that at the same time offers a critical view of their society. The directors of the New Argentine Cinema would create their own mix of the three cinemas of Solanas and Quitana.

The 70s brought an abrupt end to Peronism and to the populist, socially involved cinema of the 60s. Poverty, political unrest, a strained economy and the fall of Peronism, brought a radical change to the industry. Peron was exiled in '73 and after a brief and unsuccessful attempt at returning to power, he died in 1974. With his death, a military dictatorship, known as the Juntas come to power. They ushered in a decade of state controlled repressiveness, abuse and terror. During this period heavy censorship and lack of resources limited filmmakers to dealing with simple minded topics. Later documentary filmmakers Raymundo Gleyzer, Pablo Szir and Enrique Juarez disappeared, shocking the industry into silence until the early 80s.

After the fall of the Juntas in 83, film in Argentina experienced a rebirth. The need for collective mourning was satisfied by the cinema. Filmmakers were finally able to mourn the last ten years

of disappearing friends, of forced silence, paranoia, curfews and torture. In the words of Patricia Aufheuer (1986, p.54):

“Film was the nation’s confessional, the cinema, the church, the place to seek a catharsis and acceptance of the traumatic wounds of the dictatorship. Cinema going was a collective experience, an act of self-purging.”

Films played a cathartic role for the nation. Some of the most important films of this tendency were Luis Puenzo’s Oscar winning *The Official Story (La Historia Oficial)* in 1985, *Camila 84m* by Maria Luisa Bemberg and the Fernando Solanas’ film *Gardel’s Exile (El exilio de Gardel)* in 1985. These films enjoyed great success both on the international scene as well as inside Argentina, where they functioned as the best representatives of this “film of catharsis”, as B.Ruby Rich (1997, p.282) explains, “films experienced a shift from revolutionary (in the 60s, as in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cinema) to revelatory”. A process akin to Italian films of the 40s, where neorealist filmmakers turned their attention towards the nation and its recent historical woes. This revival, however, was short-lived.

The 90s was a decade of economic upheaval in Argentina. Before the banks withheld, and began seizing accounts in 2001, the country had been subjected to a series of aggressive neo-liberal reforms (PAES). The IMF placed a noose on the country’s economy and with it came the selling off of the nation’s vast wealth. Oil, railroads, mining, the wheat fields and the beef ranchos of the Pampas, were all sold-off to satisfy the global financial entities and the over-permissive, weak government of Carlos Menem. In response the people took to the streets, countless protests, strikes, roadblocks, civil disobedience became commonplace in all the Argentinian provinces. The dictatorship had ended less than ten years before and the neoliberal policies of Menem had already led the country to a catastrophic default. In the economic turmoil caused by hyperinflation, filmmaking suffered the most. Hundreds of cinemas closed their doors and the

national studio system declared bankruptcy. At the same time, transnational distributors bought Hollywood films at greatly reduced prices, effectively out-pricing national cinema and lowering the screen quota for Argentine films. In response to ever mounting pressure, filmmakers in Argentina resorted to international co-productions to finance their films. Thanks to this model films like Eliseo Suviela's *The Dark Side of the Heart* (*El Lado Oscuro del Corazon*, 1992) and Adolfo Aristarain's *A Place In The World* (*Un lugar del Mundo*, 1992) were made. Despite the heavy dependence on foreign financing and a generally bleak outlook, cinema made great strides in Argentina, especially in 1991 when Manuel Antin founded the FUC, (Fundacion Universidad del Cine). In 1995 its first group of students, launched a collective film called *Short Stories* (*Historias Breves*). Amongst the debutant films were directors Daniel Burman, Jorge Gaggero, Israel Caetano and Lucrecia Martel (however Martel did not study herself in FUC, she was briefly enrolled in the ENERC, before dropping out to continue on her own). It is this group of young filmmakers that critics have come to identify as the New Argentine Cinema. They are a loose group of filmmakers that share a common history and rich cinema tradition but have no single specific agenda and no manifesto. Their aesthetic is varied, pluralistic but there is a clear tendency towards realism, and themes of disillusion, trauma and urban life.

The filmmakers of contemporary Argentina make their films through international funds, co-productions and, when available, state funding. They often own the production company and work within a network of fellow filmmakers that function in different roles in each others' films. This is why Jens Andermann (2012) argues that the New Argentine Cinema is a generational project, not a collective under a homogenous manifesto. It's not a magazine group, nor a political movement, but a group of film-educated students that launched their debuts at local and international festivals and garnered attention by virtue of the quality cinema they produced. New Argentine Cinema can be thought of as the heterogeneous outcome of a decade and a half full of the profound changes in film circulation and consumption - aided by festivals, film journals and

with the emergence of new diversified audiences - the possibilities offered by cheaper, lightweight technologies such as digital video and editing software, the consolidation of film schools raising the levels of formal and technical expertise, the introduction of new fragmentary and improvisational rhythms of production and last, but not least, the ways in which these have made a cinema that is contemporaneous, engaged and curious about its own present.

### **Martel and the New Argentine Cinema**

Where does Martel fit into this context? While her films fit decisively into the contemporary tendency of engaged and critical cinema, she diverges from her peers in that she has chosen to make films about life outside Buenos Aires. Her preferred location to stage her films is her home province of Salta. Far removed from the "Porteño" culture of Buenos Aires, Salta is one of the northernmost provinces of Argentina. It is a place where race and class go hand in hand, where the aftertaste of colonialism is still ingrained and very visible in everyday life.

In his book on New Argentine cinema, Jens Andermann (2012, p.62) observes that:

"[...] in Argentina's cultural tradition, rural and natural locations signal not just an opposition to the city and the values of modernity and cosmopolitanism associated with it, but they also [...] promise a more truthful and substantial insight into the reality and plight of the nation, unvarnished with the port-city's superficial and delusive mirages of civility."

Martel's cinema, specifically placed in her native Salta province, supports the idea that rural society offers a clearer picture of the nation as a whole. While Buenos Aires prides itself on its cosmopolitan and European flair, the rest of the country is largely rural and deeply seated in the traditions of Catholicism and Colonialism. From the middle class stagnation in *The Swamp*, the interplay of religiousness and eroticism in *The Holy Girl*, and the vices of the ruling class in *The Headless Woman*, the themes dealt with in Martel's filmography, strongly represent the New Argentine Cinema's interests. These themes are already noticeable in her early short films such

as *The Dead King (El Rey Muerto)*. At the same time her use of Salta, her approach to sound and her narrative techniques are the key defining elements of her filmmaking and that which sets her apart from other New Argentinian Cinema directors. As revealed in detail in the following chapters, Martel's filmography constantly looks to uncover this reality, and the relationships that make up the fabric of provincial Argentina, and so reflect upon all of Latin America.

## 1. THE SWAMP

*The Swamp (La Cienaga, 2001)* was Martel's directorial debut and the film that first placed her prominently in the international spotlight. The film chronicles the lives and interactions of a middle-class family in the Salta province over the course of a summer. Reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it is a tale, which revolves around two families, one in a rural hacienda, and the other in Salta. The first family is composed of Mecha (Graciela Borges), the drunken matriarch, Gregorio (Martin Adjemian) an aging, good-for-nothing husband, and their offspring Jose (Juan Cruz), Veronica (Leonora Balcarce), Joaquin (Diego Baenas) and Momi (Sofia Bertolotto) the youngest daughter. The second family is Mecha's cousin Tali (Mercedes Moran), her husband Rafael (Daniel Valenzuela), their two daughters and their accident prone son Luciano (Sebastian Montagna). The film does not rely on a single concrete plot line, but instead follows the family members as they wade in a slow but inevitable process of decay. The film follows the family members, cross cutting between them, each one interacts with the other and are often contrasted for thematic effect. It is an exploration of the provincial middle class, at the same time allegorical and defiant of simplification.

Martel opens the film on the sound of rolling thunder. A pool scene, images of the family home (La Mandragora), a storm brewing in the distance, foreboding. The scene serves as an example of her "layering" narration style. In the scene the distant sounds of the storm, the gun shots from the mountain are contrasted with the damp heat and putrid atmosphere where a group of drunken adults gather by a pool. Both a moment of foreshadowing and the film's first metaphoric implementation of sound/image space. Next we are introduced to Vero, Momi and Isabel, the family's servant. The film's inciting incident also appears early in the first sequence, when a drunk Mecha falls and cuts herself, and no one reacts. This lack of engagement will be repeated throughout the film and serves to showcase the complete disengagement that grips the family's



elders. In this scene we're also exposed to the children alone in the woods and Isabel's and Mecha's problem with each other.

The film develops around the homecoming of the family members to the Mandragora in the wake of Mecha's accident. The overcrowded family estate becomes a place for their relationships to become strained as the adults take to drinking to cope with everyday life and the teenage children are left to their own devices. It touches upon chauvinism, abandonment of children, loss of faith, withdrawal from society and class dynamics.

### **Narrative Structure. Syuhezt and fabula.**

All of Martel's film are character driven. Plot is a means to develop and advance different aspects of character exploration. In *The Swamp*, each character has their own storyline, with their own problems. When placed together we are given a mosaic of human issues, each one specific to provincial life in Argentina and at the same time universal.

The story or *fabula* revolves around the aftermath of Mecha's accident. The family members come to visit her and their interactions reveal the family's state of decay. Broadly the plot is as follows: Mecha and Tali want to get away for a weekend, with the excuse of buying school supplies for the children, but fail. Jose escapes his lover/boss in Buenos Aires and comes to his hometown but must return. Momi's story is that of love for Isabel and the trauma of losing her. Mecha's and Tali's failed trip to Bolivia, Jose coming home from Buenos Aires, Momi and Isabel are the main story lines. Along with these, Martel interweaves secondary characters like Gregorio, Joaquin and Luciano to further illustrate and explore the film's themes.

The film's syuhezt (or how the story is told) is based on cross cutting between episodic tableaux of the main and secondary lines. The film is a series of small story lines whose intersections

resonate and create meaning. Martel describes her narrative strategy as storytelling in “layers”. This means that in a single scene she will have several elements of the different story lines, and then bring one or the other to the forefront at different times. She also gives equal importance to the scenes, and does not particularly emphasize any one of these story lines. Jubis (2009 p.6) observes that: “the significance of any isolated moment in this film rarely registers as particularly important when it appears. It only acquires thematic and dramatic resonance when that moment is associated with subsequent ones.” This is a direct result of Martel’s layering method. It’s necessary to add, that as a result of the accumulated information preceding them, the closer to the end of the film the events have the greater thematic power and resonance. This might seem obvious at first, but it is an essential distinction that Jubis fails to note. As the film progresses the audience recognizes recurring elements and reads them in the context of the film. *The Swamp*’s many thematic lines are elaborated, constructed with this technique. It’s a film that serves as a testament to the respect between director and audience. The audience is expected to pay attention, to make connections, come to conclusions, to be actively engaged in the narrative. The director in turn is expected to deliver a moving, coherent and powerful discourse.

Another important aspect of the narrative technique used in *The Swamp* is Martel’s belief that causality should not be the driving force of the narrative, but that it is the interaction between the layers that create narrative momentum. The result is a slow building of an image of the characters and their world. It is important to note that even if the film doesn’t emphasize the plot points of classic structure, each individual story line has an evolution. The characters go through experiences that change them, much like in a classic 3-act narrative. At the same time Martel’s narratives are elliptic, in the sense that she deliberately cuts away at key moments and leaves resolutions hanging for most of the characters. For example Mecha’s story line starts with her drunk by the pool. She has an accident, she convalesces and fears she will never leave her room. She tries to get away with Tali, fails, whether her fear of becoming permanently bedridden is

fulfilled or not is suggested but never shown. This elliptic syuzhet is most apparent later in the film (arguably the film's climax), when due to the neglect of his parents, Luciano falls to his death. Martel doesn't show the immediate effect of the event, cutting out the causal link between event and aftermath, but instead cuts to Momi and Isabel by the pool, mirroring the first scene. The death of this character is a turning point in the film. It is the moment where the slow build up condenses into its full meaning; the children suffer from the decay and neglect of the adults.

## **Sound**

Martel is very outspoken about the key role of sound in her films. Its importance coming from her belief and experience in the oral tradition of storytelling. In an interview with David Oubina (2007, p.60) she claims that: "Orality is the origin of the narrative." and that "the sound of the story invades and orientates your look. It's the sound that guides you."

In *The Swamp*, sound and image are non-convergent. Meaning that sound does not follow image, being detached from the visual component yet firmly rooted in the reality of the scene. This gives each scene a great naturalistic quality as if the events were unfolding despite the presence of the camera. Such sounds often have an uncertain origin. They are diegetically possible but they don't have an equivalent source present in the visual field. The result is that the audience becomes a witness to a small portion of a vast world. As if seeing through a small crack, a tear in the fabric of Martel's narrative reality. Andermann (2012 p.81) calls this type of sound design non-convergent. He claims that: "the non-convergence between the visual and the auditive cognition, gives rise to naturalist aesthetics of place in which adult visual sovereignty and control is surrendered to the more fluid non-linear and anti-causal perceptual experience of children and adolescents." Indeed this "extra-imagined" sound is one of Martel's authorial signatures. Andermann (2012 p.82) also refers to it as "sound with uncertain origin". By isolating and

intensifying certain sounds they acquire a power of signification the sound does not have naturally. As Jubis (2009 p.25) points out “the sound becomes something for the viewer to remember and incorporate into his or her search for meaning.”

Another use of sound is somewhat akin to optical focus and depth-of-field. Martel will often isolate and intensify sounds, but she also creates multilayered soundtracks. Prime examples of this being the sound of the chairs being dragged across the cement, the clink of the glasses, the gunshots in the distance, the storm approaching. By doing so Martel utilizes contrast of the visual space with the sound space to heighten our attention. At the same time, thanks to the repetition and juxtaposition with the image-content and with each other, key sounds acquire meaning. Such as when the children firing on the stranded cow; Momi’s whispered prayer next to Isabel or the mosquitos flying over the swampy pool. All these images and sounds combined with the characters appearance and the context create a very strong impression of stagnation, rot and complacency.

## **Image**

Martel describes her approach to the visual component of the film as being partly improvised and heavily dependent on her preparation of the soundtrack. This however doesn’t mean that the visual component of her film is random. Within the film, Martel has a definite visual strategy to create meaning and explore her themes. The shot sizes, particularly during the opening sequence are mostly close-ups of body parts, glasses, etc, as Liz Greene (2012, p.59) points out, “The use of close and partial framing allows the soundtrack to dominate the opening sequences, thus the soundscape dictates the filmic environment”. Thanks to the interplay between image and sound, in this case by creating a discontinuous, disjointed image space, Martel is able to heighten our awareness of the sound space and its relationship to the images on screen.

Another one of the film's visual strategies is the expressive use of space and movement. Each age group in the family has a specific space where they develop and where their stories unfold. It is a use of space that offers nuanced, symbolic value. For example, the children are associated with nature, mountains (*el Monte*), its mist, untamed nature, and its lawless freedom. The adolescents are linked with the town of *The Swamp*, busy, dirty, sexually charged, explosive, carnivalesque, erratic, confused. Lastly, the adults are linked with the rotting hacienda, *La Mandragora* fallen into decay, like the green putrid waters of the neglected pool.

Following this, Martel also uses movement or lack thereof as an expressive tool. The youths are in constant motion, running to the woods, swimming, hunting, dancing, jumping, a vital force within them driving them to action, the restlessness of a life to be discovered. The adults on the complete opposite side of the spectrum are characterized by immobility. Mecha's mother, we are told, spent her last years bedridden, unwilling to move. The adults are swamped, stuck, like the cow in the mud. Following this logic of movement and stasis, the film visually suggests Momi's transition from adolescence into adulthood through an evolution of her character's behavior in the mise-en-scene. At first Momi is active, going around the house with Isabel, going to the town, and swimming. At the end of the film Momi transitions into motionlessness. She ends by the pool, like her mother, a stark coming of age, lounging by the putrid pool.

The camera placement, its composition and editing, often emphasize spatial detachment between characters. Especially between adults and their children. For example in one scene, when Tali is on the phone, and her children are playing off screen, she pays no attention to them. This is used as a visual / aural tool to create separation, to show neglect, to weave the notion of a generation that is left to figure itself out even from childhood. Andreman (2012 p.81) elaborates on this: "Mecha on the telephone situates her in a position of spatial detachment and distraction towards the multiple movements and activities of her children. Later in the film this vein, this theme, this thematic line, this seed is payed off powerfully when Luciano falls to his death."

This brings us to one of the film's defining visual characteristics: Reflection, repetition, recursive nature, the self-replicating vices of the family are not only expressed by the narrative content but also by the form and the film language she uses. Mirrors, reflections on glass and objects, characters are often framed through transparent objects. The members of the family are like fractals of self-replicating traumas, vicious ideologies that no one seems to notice and that the younger members of the family are doomed to repeat over and over *ad infinitum*. That is the true tragedy behind Martel's *The Swamp*, a sense of hopelessness for the family, the province, the entire region. Which is particularly poignant since Martel states that knowledge, or rationalizing of the vice does not present a cure or a solution. Mecha knows what happened to her mother, Jose knows about his father, Momi even criticizes her mom's neglect, but none of them is capable of action, all the characters in this story suffer from a lack of agency.

### **Characters**

Martel's visual strategy emphasizes immobility. This follows the way she chooses to characterize *The Swamp's* family members. Martel's characters are not agents, they are victims of the story that unfolds in spite of them. Characters are at best passive players, always on the receiving end of chance. They have little to no agency and the narrative revolves around how they react to what happens to them rather than how they proactively seek a goal. This is the key difference between Martel's narratives and the classic structure professed by mainstream conventions. To press this point further; Martel uses a botched plan to show stagnation, complacency and miscommunication. Mecha and her cousin Tali, plan a trip to Bolivia. They talk about it, obliquely making arrangements but it never materializes. They are passive observers of the world around them, of their children's growth. They are unwilling and unable to prevent or change the events that befall on them. This lack of agency differentiates Martel's characters from those commonly found in other films of the New Argentinian Cinema. For example Pablo Trapero's Zapa (in *El Bonanrense*), a character who is caught in a large web of corruption but who then moves himself

to a position of power. Characters in a Martel film are like leaves in a gusty wind. They are carried away by forces they can't hope to control.

One aspect where this is revealed is in the characters' sexuality, and more specifically pubescent sexuality. It is a sexuality that enters in force and that the character has no means to understand or deal with. Momi's semi-sexual relation with Isabel and Vero's quasi-incestuous interactions with her brother Rafael are the main examples. Sexuality is always on the verge, its always something that's almost about to happen. The audience expects it, anticipates the tension between the characters to spill over into action. However in Martel's narratives the characters are stuck in a world of fleeting glances that have no means to become more.

*The Swamp* is an ensemble film, as such it's apt to further analysis by breaking down each of the characters' narratives:

Mecha is the Matriarch of "La Mandragora". The casting choice also offers an interesting intricacy. Graciela Borges is a well-known soap opera actress in Argentina and before *The Swamp* her career was in a slump. This resonates with Mecha's life. Her marriage has devolved into routine verbal abuse. Her husband is weak and vain. The resentment she harbors for him drives all their interactions. In the film's opening sequence she drunkenly falls and hurts herself. Although the injury is by no means serious, she uses it as a means to victimize herself and stay in bed convalescing. She abuses Isabel, berates Momi, ostracizes Gregorio (she even orders him to move out into a small room). She holds all power in the family but does not exercise it in anyway other than to abuse and push others around. Martel does however imbue her with motherly qualities. She shows great affection for her son Jose. In this line we are treated to one of the film's few but effective light hearted moments. That is when Jose and Vero dance in Mecha's room (as an additional nuance, this scene also advances Jose's and Vero's never-quite-incestuous yet very physical relationship). Mecha's one lifeline is Tali and their never-to-be trip to Bolivia. Their

relationship is superficially intimate as neither woman can openly admit their flaws and their desperation. Their potentially redeeming trip is relegated to that most Latin-American state of “mañana”.

Gregorio is one of the straight forward secondary characters in the film. His characterization is one dimensional. His function in the narrative is as motivation and to antagonize other characters, in this case Mecha. Gregorio is a vain character. Mecha chastises him constantly for his drinking and for dying his hair. We also find out that he had an affair with Mercedes (who also has an affair with his son Jose). He is a weak and powerless man, and an indifferent, alcoholic father figure. The proficient and tasteful way Martel treats the material is once more demonstrated as the relationship between Gregorio, Mecha and Jose could have easily fallen into tacky melodrama. She however chooses to underplay these relationships. They are only mentioned in passing or tangentially shown on screen.

Momi is the closest to a main character that Martel offers us. Momi is a fictionalized version of Martel’s adolescence. Her story and her characterization are among the strongest in the film and central to its thematic development. Momi functions as a witness to her mother’s decay. When she tries to intervene her mother responds with backhanded comments. Her mother treats her with disdain. Her brother thinks she’s “dirty”, Vero is indifferent to her. Her only source of familial love and attention comes from Isabel (Andrea Lopez), the maid. At the same time her relationship with her is also underscored by a sexuality that never becomes overt. Their relationship is marked by a dual quality of mother-daughter that at the same time has a sexual component. This is never openly shown, but Martel suggests it through actions and visual cues, like Isabel feeding Momi, them napping together or when Momi tells Vero that she “Doesn’t want to be with anyone else but Isabel”. At the same time Momi is not without flaws. She is well aware of the class structure and abuses its rules whenever she is displeased with Isabel. Her departure triggers a crisis of faith for Momi. Once Isabel leaves, Momi ventures to the site where people have been said to



have seen the virgin. When she sees nothing she steps through that doorway from the naivety of faith to disbelief, to adult cynicism. Momi returns and acknowledges that there is no God to listen to her prayers. Just like the character Martel herself went to see an appearance of the Virgin Mary and did not see anything

José (Juan Cruz Bordeu) is the mid-to late twenties son of Mecha and Gregorio. He lives in Buenos Aires and has a romantic relationship with his employer, an older woman called Mercedes. Incidentally, Mercedes is also Gregorio's former mistress. Jose is used in the film as a repetition of Gregorio, an expression of how Gregorio used to be. Martel often shows him tending to his hair (just like Gregorio). He embodies chauvinism, pride and narcissism but at the same time he is portrayed as a loving son and brother.

Verónica (Leonora Balcarce) is the mid-teens daughter of Mecha and Gregorio. She is characterized by an unhealthy attraction to her brother and a certain tendency to force her sexuality on others. For example she makes Perro (Fabio Villafane) take off his shirt. She teases and plays in the mud with her brother Jose. Martel constantly shows her giving him fleeting looks. When he comes back beaten up after a bar brawl, she strips him down, with a hint of pleasure. These "looks", always treated in big close-ups, carry a sense of guilt and pleasure. Vero's character and in particular her relationship with her brother Jose offers some tantalizing moments. Jose and Vero's relationship is pictured as a very close, physical and tactile one. In the dance scene with Jose, it is Vero who leaps up to dance with him. Later in the film they wrestle in the mud and then when she showers off the mud she is both afraid and exited when he almost steps into the shower with her. There's an intimacy that goes beyond a brother and sister relationship, something that neither character really sees but is more than happy to participate in.

Joaquín is Mecha's and Gregorio's youngest son. Everyone and everything in *La Mandragora* is neglected. Joaquin takes this lack of attention and reacts by thinking that it gives him strength. His parent's neglect is portrayed through a deformation of his eye. He had an accident that has destroyed his right eye. His parents talk about getting plastic surgery for him but as everything else in *La Mandragora* it is never done. He is the most openly critical member of the family towards the native lower class. He says they are dirty, rude and that they indulge in bestiality. He calls them Kollo, a pejorative term for the native lower class. For example when the youth goes to the reservoir, he takes some fish a lower class boy has caught and throws them away, saying they don't eat such garbage. However, for all his criticism of the lower-class he shows all of the flaws he criticizes. During one of the dinner scenes he is accused of being himself dirty and rude. He is also told off for fondling dogs. He is a character strongly associated with hypocrisy and the wilderness. When in the mountain. He tells the other kids not to touch the dog, lest he loose his aggressive hunting behavior and become soft. That is what has happened to Joaquin himself. The lack of parenting has made him a crude person, always in the wilderness where he finds comfort.

Isabel is the low class maid of the family. She is a descendant of the Kollo people, one of the native groups of the Salta region. Kollo, is both their own demonym and a pejorative others use for them. Class division is one of the social building blocks of provincial society. Members of one class do not mix with the other outside well defined relationships, usually one of servant and master, employer and employee. A remnant of the colonial days when the native peoples were treated as cattle. Isabel fills the role of the mother and sexual interest in Momi's life. But despite the apparent intimacy of their relationship, Isabel is trapped by Momi. She is forced to be a surrogate mother to an abusive child and forced to suffer Mecha's accusations that she is a thief and a layabout. Eventually Mecha fires Isabel, also accusing her of being pregnant.

Tali is Mecha's cousin. She lives in the small town of *The Swamp* with her husband Rafael and their two girls and the accident prone child, Luciano. Tali is Mecha's only seemingly close relationship. Tali and Mecha's excuse for the trip to Bolivia is to buy the kids their school supplies yet when she discovers that Rafael has bought them in secret she does not admit to disappointment and instead she simply dismisses it. Mecha compliments her on having a great man for a husband. However Martel chooses to frame Tali as she reveals her disappointment and the conflicting feelings she buries. Both women are incapable of admitting that they are in a rut, that inability to express discontent, that lack of self-analysis and self-criticism feeds their state and deepens the hole they are stuck in. Tali is also a neglectful mother. The way Martel shows this is particularly interesting. We see Tali's house, we hear her talking on the phone, while the kids are left alone, they run and play while she is absent. This pays off out later in the film when Luciano falls to his death because of the ladder Tali left in the yard.

Rafael is Tali's husband. His role in the narrative is merely to be a disruptive force to Mechas and Tali's plan. He is an oppressive husband hiding under the mask of concern. When Tali tells him about her plan to go to Bolivia, he doesn't openly oppose it but starts to argue that it's too expensive and dangerous. To settle the matter he goes off and secretly buys the school supplies. Martel does give him, as she does with all her characters, a redeeming quality, a nuance with which we can connect. He is a caring father.

Agustina (Noelia Bravo Herrera) and Mariana (Maria Micol Ellero) are Tali's girls. They really have no narrative purpose, though they do reinforce the theme of the younger generation emulating the older. They are seen preparing for a carnival in Salta and playing with Luciano. They also create an interesting interplay between Martel's films. The girls sing a song into a fan about a "Dr.Jano", which Martel explains was part of the genesis of her next film *The Holy Girl*.

Luciano is Tali's six year old son. He is curious, imaginative and highly prone to accidents. The first time we see him, next to a dead rabbit (a nifty bit of foreshadowing) he is washing a wounded knee. His appearances are often set within situations that highlight the theme of neglect and disinterest. He washes the wound on his own (climbing to the sink). His parents leave him locked in a hot car. In his final scene he is left alone and climbs the ladder to his death. Every action he engages in serves as an omen of his eventual demise. When he plays with his sisters running around near the ladder in the garden, he plays dead, right on the spot where later on in the film he will perish. Another moment of foreshadowing is in the mountain forrest. Luciano steps between the cow and Joaquin's rifle. Martel cuts back and forth from the rifle to Luciano, creating the impression that Luciano is going to be shot. Martel cuts away during a pov from the rifle and we hear the retort of a gunshot not knowing whether he is dead or not.

Perro (Fabio Villafane) is a minor character, Isabel's boyfriend. He is the male component of the lower class.

Mercedes (Silvia Baylé) is Jose's lover and employer in Buenos Aires. She was also Gregorio's mistress at some point in the past.

## **Themes**

*The Swamp* is first and foremost an exploration of the decaying Argentinian middle class, at the same time the film defies a one dimensional allegorical analysis. It is an overt and powerful critique on provincial life and this is also balanced by scenes that portray the positive side of the characters. Martel counter-balances the broody mood with tender moments. Where the atmosphere of doom and stagnation opens up to reveal warmth and a sense of togetherness. These scenes bring a human component that imbues the film with a narrative honesty that allegories usually don't have. The dance scene, the relationship between Luciano and his father, the water balloons , the scene where the youths go to the reservoir and so on, give relief and light

heartedness. At the same time they are always contrasted with the social forces that lie beneath. For example in the scene where the kids of the wealthy family and those of the lower class go to the reservoir and fish together, on their way back Joaquin throws away the fish saying they don't eat garbage. The middle class thus projects decay with no philosophy, no goals, like the convalescing Mecha in her room. Martel herself has said that what these characters, and the middle class by extension, lack is a measure of "trust in the possibility of changing the world through your own will."

The relationship between the younger generation and the elders is at the thematic center of the film. Specifically the film sets out to show how the vices, mistakes and sins of a previous generation are transmitted like a moral disease passing from one generation to the next. In a sense the film supports determinism, a view that history is self-replicating. We are not only unequivocally influenced by the past but we are fated to repeat it. Jose is like his father, Momi and Vero become like their mother, and Mecha herself might end up bedridden like her own Mother. Mecha's withdrawal is used to exemplify this strongly. After the accident (in the opening scene) she is only seen inside the house, most of the time in the bed. Later and very subtly Martel introduces a refrigerator in her room (a set dressing choice only noticed upon repeated viewings), indicating that she has moved into the room permanently. Mecha is aware of the path she has taken. She even expresses fear that she will indeed become like her mother, but she does nothing to change her situation. She's the character that mostly clearly exemplifies lack of agency. Her story, resonates with the image of the cow stuck in the mud, waiting to die. La Mandragora, the name of Mecha's estate is a plant that has sedative properties, like morphine or ether. It was used in the region for hundreds of years as a natural sedative. In *The Swamp*, the evocatively named La Mandragora with its cesspool, the disarray of the house, form external manifestations of Mecha's swamped state. Other characters that embody this theme are Momi, who after failing to witness a miracle loses her faith and becomes like Mecha. Then Jose, who,

not only is as vain as his father Gregorio, but even has an oppressive relationship with one of his father's former lovers. Visually the theme is also supported in the final scene where the two girls lounge by the pool echoes in form and content to that moment where we first meet Mecha and the others, drunk by the pool letting life slip by without caring.

Chauvinism is a secondary theme Martel touches upon in the film. It comes to the forefront in a scene where Jose goes to a town party and tries to kiss Isabel. Jubis (2009 p.36) claims that it is an expression of "the lords right" over his vassals. One of the many social conventions of the colony and perhaps a dark inheritance that prevails in the mind of Latin-Americans. Jose's abuse enrages Perro who beats him up, giving class-dynamics a very physical expression.

Argentina and Salta in particular are traditionally very Catholic. Martel integrated several religious motifs into *The Swamp*, through Catholic imagery in the background, and certain moments interspersed in the narrative. Martel periodically intercuts to a televised reportage about the appearance of the virgin in town. Martel herself claims that Salta has a tendency towards the supernatural. In her town it is common for people to "see the virgin" in the most unlikely of places. In the film this is expressed by the appearance of the virgin in a water tank. At first it is a mere roadside attraction, which Mecha dismisses, while Momi and Isabel are attracted to it. Later in the film it plays a central role in the character change Momi experiences. She is the only openly religious character in the film. When we first meet her, she's lying in bed with Isabel, praying to God never to take Isabel away. Other family members, particularly Mecha, disapprove of Momi's and Isabel's overly close relationship. In Salta the middle class white people and the dark skinned Kollo people should not mix. Once Isabel leaves, Momi goes to the place where the virgin has been spotted and claims she saw nothing. Her journey is that from a place of faith and innocence to apathy and cynicism. When she sits by the pool with Vero, an image that mirrors the opening moments of the film, she claims she saw nothing. She loses faith. Faith that God will hear her.

She has gone to find out why Isabel has left her and finds nothing. God doesn't answer prayers. Martel talks about this realization in an interview with Amy Taubin (2009) for Film Comment. She says that for her it was a fundamental moment, when she was struck by the truth that humanity is alone on this and there's nothing else but other people. That is the truth *The Swamp* delivers. We're alone and neglected. A lack of personal responsibility leads to the suffering of people of all generations.

## 2. THE HOLY GIRL

*The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa, 2004)* is a coming of age story that revolves around religious passion, redemption and criticism of social appearances. Martel centers the film around a teenage girl discovering sexuality and her religious fervor. It is a story of a religious-erotic calling on a character on the cusp of womanhood. As in *The Swamp*, the film has a strong autobiographical core, mainly expressed through the setting and the relationships between parents and children. The film is set in Hotel Las Termas and its surroundings, both places where Martel spent part of her formative years.

### **Narrative Structure. Syuhezt and Fabula**

The film follows Amalia (Maria Alche), the teenage daughter of the hotel owner Helena (Mercedes Moran). Amalia lives in a rundown hotel with her mother and attends Catholic catechism with her friend Josefina (Julieta Zylberberg). Both girls learn about religious passion whilst they explore their budding sexuality. At the same time an ear and throat medical convention is being held at the hotel. One day in the midst of a crowd gathered to hear a theremin, Dr.Jano (Carlos Belloso), one of the doctors attending the convention, sexually harasses Amalia by pressing himself against her. Amalia is initially shocked and doesn't know how to react. Influenced by the lessons from catechism she decides that it's her divine calling to save Dr.Jano. He becomes the object of both her sexual and religious desires. At the same time, not knowing that Amalia is her daughter, Dr.Jano develops a relationship with Helena. The film brings these characters closer to each other and culminates with the revelation of Dr.Jano's crime at the medical convention. Martel's second feature is structured like a classic three act narrative, with a short first act, a long second act, and a short resolution. As in her previous film, Martel uses elliptical narration, meaning that she leaves



key information and key plot moments outside the diegesis. She forgoes showing the climax on-screen.

Unlike her previous feature, the film has a clear protagonist. This is undoubtedly Amalia's journey, though the stories of the secondary characters are also important, Dr.Jano and Helena in particular. As in classic three act narrative the story is told linearly but it moves between the different story lines which converge at the climax. As in *The Swamp*, Martel invests time in scenes that have no apparent purpose in the causal chain and function to expose characterization and delve into the world that the characters inhabit. Martel herself often speaks about her dislike for narrative causality, as she deems it simplistic. In *The Holy Girl*, elliptic narration is strongly demonstrated at the film's climax, where Dr.Jano's denouncement is left out. In this scene Josefina and her parents come to the hotel, where they demand to talk to Helena. It is the closing of the congress and everyone is there. Dr.Jano's wife comes and tells him: "there will be a scandal, they have come for the man who touched one of the hotel's girls" Just as they call him to the stage. He dresses up and goes to face the crowd. Martel cuts away from the actual moment of revelation. She cuts to Amalia at the pool with Josefina. The latter tells Amalia she will always take care of her. And the two girls swim in the pool oblivious to what is about to happen.

Exposition is also delivered obliquely. For example, after Dr.Jano has abused her, Amalia sees his photo on a brochure and asks about him. We never see the photo. Martel stays on Amalia, and her reaction, and in combination with information layered in previously we know exactly who she has seen. This is one of Martel's most common storytelling strategies. She never diverts attention to expository details, meaning non-attentive audience members are likely to miss them. Her film language does not say "this is exposition, this is important", it simply occurs with no emphasis. It is a strategy that opposes Hitchcock's rule, which advocates that the size of an object in the frame should be proportional to its importance in the story at that moment. If Martel

were to follow this guideline she would have cut to a large close-up of the brochure and then an equally tight shot of Amalia's reaction. By not following Hitchcock's rule the audience has to actively participate and fill in the gaps created by this type editing progression.

This is type of narrative style is also exemplified in the way Martel handles the key scene when Dr.Jano discovers that Amalia is Helena's daughter. In the scene, Helena casually introduces her daughter Amalia. It is, arguably one of the biggest moments in the film. The scene is a prime example of how Martel uses what Larrea (2011, par.3) calls a "claustrophobic, disorientating, and layered mise en scène." Martel depicts the event casually, avoiding traditional scene coverage, which might include for example, instead of using a series of shots that highlight the reactions of the characters and then cutting back and forth between shot and reverse-shot. Instead she edited the entire scene in two wide masters, and then a single close up of Dr.Jano's reaction as the revelation sinks in. Martel does not really build up to the moment visually. It simply happens without warning. It is a detachment from the characters. This minimal approach to coverage gives the moment a feeling of spontaneity, as if it simply happened. In the scene Amalia stands behind him, he exits abruptly. Just then he gets a call from his wife. By cutting from one scene to the next, Martel shows the two worlds of Dr.Jano coming closer together.

Oral storytelling is once more integrated into *The Holy Girl's* narrative. Martel herself has repeatedly expressed the influence oral narratives has had in her films. The stories told within the films are usually ghost or horror stories. In *The Holy Girl*, its two fold, the first comes from the biblical lectures. The second is a ghost story about an accident. Oral storytelling is used not only as a means of delivering characterization and exposition but it also functions as a plot device. The stories within the film affect the behavior of the characters directly, driving the plot forward. In Martel's cinema that which the characters hear greatly influence their understanding of the

world. For example it is because of the lessons she hears in catechism that Amalia becomes convinced that she must save Dr.Jano. In this sense orality causes and moves the plot forward.

## **Sound**

As in *The Swamp*, sound plays a predominant role in plot advancement, revealing characterization and creating meaning. The sound-space in this film is built around three ideas. First it's a device for "calling" upon others, in a broad sense, including the call of the divine and as a means of attracting attention between characters. The second way sound is used is as a means to keep the public and private life mixed with each other. Just as in her first film Martel starts with an evocative sound, one that represents a theme of the film. In this case it is the sound of piano chimes, music and a pious voice that offers her life to the lord. The song is a musicalization of Saint Teresa de Avila's "Vuestra Soy" (I Am Yours). The lyrics bring up the theme of "what God wants from us". In Catholicism and specially in Latin-America, there is a sensual, erotic undercurrent to religious experience, especially for women, where surrender, "giving in" are part of the ethos. God acquires a masculine form while the believer is feminine and is possessed by "divinity". As Jubis (2009, p.55) points out, "in Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, religious experience has an intrinsic sexual or erotic dimension to it." The second application of sound is also present in this opening sequence. In this early scene, Martel uses the sound of men walking outside. The sound is used to bring the exterior into the interior. It combines the private and the public worlds through sound. Further examples of this sound-idea are found in all of the catechesis scenes, where Martel overlays sounds coming from the street, from the hotel halls, or the sound of the theremin. This leitmotif is used again in the hotel itself, where private spaces are also aurally invaded by public ones. This sound trope expresses the key theme of interaction between private and public life but it also has a film-narration function. Martel doesn't use establishing shots. Different locations such as the hotel and the catechesis room are joined

through sound bridges. This means that by overlaying sound from two different places, they are joined, through sound, to create a film-space that is drastically different from “real space”. This strategy is used throughout the film to merge spaces, and compress characters into a claustrophobic space where there is no real privacy and everyone is just around the corner, in the next room, uncomfortably close.

Finally sound is also used to add ironic comment. For example, the religious moment of the opening scene is brought down to earth, by the sound of workers and men coming from outside. The piano is out of key, the teacher cries, struggling to keep her composure. Josefina says “she has breathing problems, it affects her brain”. It all contrasts with the abhorrently pious music. Another example of how sound is used to create irony is the theremin. This bizarre instrument is an important plot device, and serves as a catalyst. It’s the crowd-gathering attraction that provides the context for the key scene in which Dr.Jano abuses Amalia. The theremin’s tacky sound ridicules the religious, the divine, turning it into a performance, a roadside show. This entertainment dimension of religion is a pervasive element in Martel’s cinema, just like the televised appearance of the virgin in *The Swamp*. Martel also uses the theremin’s music to reflect the blurry ground between religious and sexual passion. In the film the music it plays evolves just like Amalia’s interest in Dr.Jano. The first song it plays is a common church song, then it plays Bizet’s *Carmen* suite, and finally a typical sappy Latin American love song. The change in the music mirrors the film’s theme of sexual-religious ambiguity.

In her films Martel doesn’t use non-diegetic music. Music is always diegetic and the characters interact with it. She also uses music as an evolving element of the storytelling that mirrors and comments upon the character’s own journey. Just as the theremin plays romantic and religious songs other music used in the film moves between these two categories, further contrasting and referring back to the theme. The first one is religious, which is connected with Amalia and

Josefina. The second is popular music, usually sensual and charged with sexual innuendo. This is connected with Helena. For example in a scene she suggestively dances to “Cara de Gitana”. Amalia and Josefina’s journeys are also traced by the music they sing and hear. The film begins with a religious chant, which the girls listen to intently. Later in the film they sing love songs... the lyrics shifting from “lord, I am yours” to “stay with me, I have caresses that you don’t know”. This application of music reinforces the idea of a tenuous line between the sexual and the divine that exist in the characters. Both are acts of surrender, both physical and spiritual. The film deals with the blurry ground in between. This ambiguity of the “divine calling” is also supported in the sound design of another scene. Related to this, there is a scene where the doctors test Helena’s hearing. The test is meant to determine if she can distinguish similar sounding words from each other. In the scene she mishears, “beso” (I kiss) as “rezo” (I pray), a subtle repetition of the film’s theme and Amalia’s own plight.

As in *The Swamp*, sound precedes image. The origin of the sound effects is often removed from the visual space. Martel also emphasizes certain sounds that in combination with the image help form ideas in the viewer. For example, halfway through the film, in a pool scene, Amalia clinks a metal pipe to get Dr.Jano’s attention. The clinking sound is amplified and isolated, creating the idea of a hunter toying with its prey. Another standout example of sound design is used at the end of the film, where just before Dr.Jano’s denouncement, Martel cuts to the pool where Amalia and Josefina are swimming. The sound-space in this scene is dominated by water sounds and a fly over the pool. The film ends with the hard sound of an opening faucet, running water, hinting at what has been “set loose”.

## Image

Martel has described the film's visual strategy as akin to that of a fairy tale. In interviews she mentions that she tried to create a somewhat unrealistic feel to the film. In a sense Amalia is the princess, the hotel a castle and Dr.Jano, both prince and monster. *The Holy Girl* also serves as a testament to the director's evolving visual vocabulary. The visual component of the film is more carefully tailored than the imagery in *The Swamp*. Each scene has a particular function and the visuals work in synergy to other film elements to accomplish the scene's goal. One example of Martel's visual strategy in *The Holy Girl* is that she gives each one of the main characters their own type of visual representation.

Amalia, for example is often shown in light colors, seen through windows and semi-transparent veils, the framing and composition for her character evolve through the film. At first she is composed in dirty singles, usually in the background, smaller and in focus with a large blurry object in the foreground. This is most apparent in the first theremin scene. Where she is framed in an over-the-shoulder shot with Dr.Jano's body almost completely obscuring her. As the film progresses and Amalia asserts herself, she is shown in clean single shots and close ups. In her collaboration with cinematographer Felix Monti, Martel aimed at creating an "unreal lighting scheme" for Amalia. One of the elements of stylization used in the film is sunlight through the windows. It often falls on Amalia as a halo, visually reinforcing the notion of her purity and religious passion.

Dr.Jano, on the other hand, is often shown surrounded by people. This reinforces the threat of discovery and the duality of his character. This is exemplified in the scene where we're first introduced to him. In this shot he is framed in the middle of a group, dressed vividly different from the others around him. Other instances are the scene where he comes to his room to find he has a roommate, and the scenes where he abuses Amalia in the crowd, and after he runs away he

runs into a group of doctors. Also notably he is often shown in an elevator with his colleagues, once more reinforcing the idea of the character's entrapment and the veneer of respectability he portrays. Lastly Helena, the hotel owner, is an attractive woman who is very much aware of her appearance. Martel often composes her shots to emphasize her sexuality. For example in the scene where Dr. Jano first sees her. He stops and gazes through the window, staring at her naked back. Throughout the film, Martel uses this type of image as part of her visual storytelling strategy. Sexually suggestive images are always framed through windows, doorways, fabrics, crowds, etc. The sexual object is always obscured, distanced. Furthermore in a POV shot, Martel crops Helena's head, by not showing her head or face Martel objectifies her. She is just a naked back, a body. As we learn later in the film this is the fundamental relationship between Dr. Jano and women, they are just body parts, anatomy that satisfies his needs.

This visual strategy is well illustrated in the film's inciting incident. In this scene a crowd gathers to listen to an etherophone. It plays an unbearably cheap melody typical of churches. Amalia comes to see the show. This is shown in a wide shot, with the musician in the foreground (the distraction, the performance, in a sense religion itself). Dr. Jano comes in and stands behind Amalia and proceeds to press his genitals squarely on the girl's buttocks. Then the shot sizes change to close ups of his pelvis and her buttocks. By shifting from wide shots to close ups Martel makes the abuse very private, even though it takes place in a very public space. Amalia, also framed in close up, immediately realizes what's going on. But she has no idea and no means by which to confront this abuse, as soon as she turns to face him he bolts off. Amalia of course sees him and is left perplexed.

In the catechism scenes, Martel focuses on the act of perception, particularly listening. In these scenes, she shows the middle school girls staring blankly and somewhat skeptically at the singer, their catechism teacher Inés (Mia Maestro). The angles brings attention to the act of

listening, perception. The viewer perceives the characters while they themselves perceive something else, in this case the voice of their teacher. By showing us people listening to the singing we are also made aware of our own perception. This visually reinforces the idea of “the calling”, around which all these scenes are built. That is, an external voice or sound that moves the character into action. This is exemplified in the second scene where Amalia listens to the lesson. The opening shot is composed with Inés’ mouth out of focus in the foreground and Amalia and Josefina in focus in the background. Amalia pays attention to the teacher’s mouth as it gives the lesson on the “calling of the divine”, the main motivation for her actions. In this shot Martel, makes the mouth much larger in the frame than the girls, creating a visual hierarchy between the “message” (the mouth) and the “listener” (Amalia).

Another of Martel’s visual strategies is the gaze, a shot of someone observing and the following shot of what the character observes. In *The Holy Girl* the gaze establishes the observer and the object of desire. This relationship is exchanged between characters and morphs in the film. For example: when Amalia is at the pool with her mother, Dr.Jano swims in the background, oblivious of the gaze upon him. Amalia prays compulsively as she stares at him in a tight close up, looking at him just as he turns to stare at Helena as she disrobes and enters the pool. The gaze jumps from character to character, creating a line of subjects turned objects by the gaze of desire. Martel tends to hold the shots of characters as they stare for a long time. By employing this technique, Martel establishes the triangle between the characters. Amalia wants Dr.Jano, Dr. Jano wants Helena.

True to her narrative strategy, Martel does not explicitly say that Amalia wants to save Dr.Jano. Martel visually develops Amalia’s interest in him progressively, slowly building her attraction. However there is a scene in which it is said almost overtly. Martel uses cross cutting to help crystalize the idea in the viewer. It is done when Amalia and her friend Josefina pray in the



hotel. Amalia asks if a calling can be to save a single person. The closeness between the girls supported visually by a tight close up. Instead of hearing Josefina's answer Martel cuts to Dr.Jano and his colleagues getting into an elevator, casually talking about their kids. By cutting to the girls talking about vocations to a close up of Dr.Jano, Martel supports the idea of him becoming the object of Amalia's religious fervor. The answer is delivered by the ellipsis in the edit. Then in the elevator, the civil conversation between the doctors acquires an ironic undertone when Amalia comes into frame, out of focus. She reaches out to Dr.Jano, touches his hand, just as the elevator abruptly comes to a stop and he exits. Martel often uses shots with similar content, to emphasize the preceding moment. In the elevator, when Amalia reaches out to touch Dr.Jano, the act is given emphasis by cutting to a shot of her hand floating along a glass pane and on the heads of children running by. The repetition of elements make the shots resonate with each other giving space to the audience to consider, and to create associations. Interestingly, in this sequence Amalia tries to touch Dr.Jano, then she touches the glass, the children's heads as they run and finally Dr.Janos belongings, suggesting purity and innocence. By this arrangement of shots and actions, Martel implies that Amalia has a pure, honest, if misguided, interest in her abuser.

This type of image, where the characters touch, listen or see something, is pervasive in the film. Martel herself describes the film as being tactile. Meaning that in it, the senses, perception and the sensual are prominent. In the image space this is achieved through shots of body parts, and more specifically sensory organs. Hands, ears, mouths, skin are all featured prominently in the film. For example Amalia rubs Dr.Jano's shaving cream on her shirt, and Josefina tells her she smells like flowers. All the senses are brought in, expressing the girls' sexual awakening, experiencing everything around them.

At the center of this sensual orientation of the visuals is Amalia. Martel's aesthetic choices are geared toward creating and emphasizing the confusing nature of her desires. One way Martel

accomplishes this is by obscuring events, so that the audience is also confused, and must figure out what happened. This means that within a scene she deliberately leaves out key shots that explain the action. By doing so the audience and main character share a similar state of mind. This strategy is particularly strong in *The Headless Woman*. In *The Holy Girl*, this is best represented in the scene where Amalia sneaks into Dr.Jano's room. The scene is built around tight close-ups, alternating between Amalia entering the room and Dr.Jano as he sleeps. At the same time, the soundtrack suggests that she is in the room as he sleeps. A sound wakes him up. He looks in the room but it's empty. By foregoing the use of wide-shots or a two shot, Martel makes Amalia's presence in the room uncertain. This visual-narrative strategy in which she deliberately leaves out a clear reference image with which to understand a given scene is used throughout all of Martel's films. It is a defining aspect of her storytelling technique.

## **Characters**

One way to think about the way Martel handles characterization in *The Holy Girl*, is to imagine the characters as planetary systems, where the main characters behave like planets exerting gravitational forces on each other, while at the same time these main characters have smaller secondary characters that orbit around them. For example in *The Holy Girl* each one of the main characters, Amalia ,Helena and Dr. Jano has one or two characters that serve to mirror or reflect their flaws, virtues and story line. Amalia has Josefina who is also on a process of discovering her own sexuality and has mixed feelings for her cousin. For Helena, her brother Freddy (Alejandro Urdapilleta) expresses her own confusion, while the hotel employee Mirta (Marta Lubos) functions as a personification of social judgment and moralism. Lastly, Dr.Jano has Dr.Vesalio (Arturo Goetz), an extroverted and charismatic doctor, who contrasts with the prudish and shy Dr.Jano. At the same time Dr.Vesalio has a small narrative about an affair with a hotel employee, also mirroring Dr.Jano's own narrative. What's interesting about this analogy is that

there is no center to the narrative solar system. The characters drift with no mooring. They interact and exert forces on each other creating a web of gravitational pulls. In a storytelling context this correlates to the influence they exert on each other, creating and fueling motivations, and their collisions. This web of character interactions is present in *The Swamp*, but it comes to fruition in *The Holy Girl* because of the densely packed triangle of characters. In this film each one of the members of Martel's narrative planetary system has well defined characteristics:

Amalia fulfills the role of the protagonist in the film. She is a standout character in Martel's filmography. Amalia is willful and active, she has a specific goal to accomplish and doesn't allow herself to be a victim of circumstance. Instead she is an active participant in her own story. What makes her such an interesting character is that she reinterprets the abuse in a way that reinstates her power and agency. Whether her interpretation of Dr. Jano's abuse and her choices afterward are misguided and naive are not as important as what they mean for the character. She acts, she decides, she is engaged and dynamically tries to understand what happened to her by employing her own understanding of the world. She defies and counters Dr. Jano's attempts at objectifying her, even if it's uncomfortable to see a character act in a loving way towards an abuser. That is one of the reasons the religious or "divine calling" works so well in the film. It gives her reaction a greater scope. It is not that she simply has Stockholm syndrome, but that she becomes convinced that she must save his soul. Amalia's reinterpretation of the incident comes from her catechesis. Here Amalia reads about the suffering in the world and the salvation of a soul as woman's divine calling. However the scenes in catechism always have a sexual layer running through them. For example, in every scene Josefina mentions the teacher's sexuality. This sustains the idea of the interplay between religious ecstasy and physical passion. Larrea (2011, par.4) calls it:

"warped links between the spiritual and the physical, the ambiguous meanings of images, words and gestures, the adolescent negotiation of new bodily urges, and

the concomitant confusion that arises – one that stays with many of the adult characters”.

Dr.Jano at first glance is a typical middle-class man, prudish, shy, emasculated and utterly pathetic. Martel often handles Dr.Jano’s characterization by comparing him to the men around him. For example, when we first meet Dr.Jano, he is taken to his room (which is loud and rendered as very public through the sound design). He finds that he has a grayed out, and overly social doctor for a roommate. Freddy, Helena’s brother, says “You’ll be sleeping together, in different beds of course”. Martel insinuates, makes fun of and delivers characterization in a short succinct way. Dr.Jano does nothing to oppose this, he hardly speaks up about it. He is a weak and pathetic man, one that remains silent as others trample over him, one that objectifies women as a recourse to his powerlessness. His perversion is an expression of the weak preying on those he believes are weaker, i.e. the young Amalia. He finds respite from this by anonymously objectifying and abusing women. Not only does he abuse Amalia, he objectifies Helena. He stares at Helena’s legs just before a man closes a door and one of his colleagues calls out to him. His sexual impulses are repressed by the world around him, the conference, the hotel, society, all obstruct the realization of his desire. He has no means to understand and relate to women. For example, when he attempts to abuse Amalia again and she turns to face him, he is terrified. By turning she becomes a subject cancelling out his perverted desire to objectify, anatomize women Dr.Jano develops a cold-affair with Helena. In every scene he behaves shyly, distant. Towards the end of the film he comes to see Helena. He stands there unable to speak, unable to express his feelings and unable to tell the truth. Helena takes the initiative and tells him about her feelings and she kisses him.

Helena is a superficial, unintelligent woman, a failed actress and completely obsessed with her appearance. She believes that she acquires value only through the eyes of others. Thus she’s always seeking attention and approval. Her sensuality is best expressed in the scene where she

dances “Cara de Gitana”. All of her relationships are detached and uninvolved. She never touches upon anything but small talk. This is especially clear in relation to her daughter. Their interactions, if superficially caring, reveal emotional neglect. Helena always quietens down and silences Amalia. In an early scene, Amalia steps into the room, while her mother is sleeping. Amalia says “you’re cold like a grave” the mother replies strongly “don’t say such things”. In the pool when Amalia prays, Helena quietens her down and tells her to sing something else. Not once does she take an interest in the life, emotional state or activities of her daughter. Instead she is concerned about what her ex-husband thinks of her and her relationship with Dr.Jano.

Josefina is a reflection of Amalia’s own sexual and religious discovery and although she is not comic relief per se, she provides the film with some much needed light-hearted moments. Josefina also mirrors Amalia’s religious-erotic confusions her sexual explorations with her cousin. She is very physical with her cousin, stopping before it becomes intercourse. When her cousin insists on it, she says she doesn’t want to have pre-marriage sex. However they continue to tease and fondle each other. As in *The Swamp*, the youngsters are abandoned by the adults. In the absence of guidance they find alternate ways to give meaning to their lives, and to entertain themselves. They can indulge in their sexual explorations because their grandmother has gone to a prayer group. Josefina’s closeness to Amalia is also physical. Martel often composes them in the same shot, touching or kissing, albeit in a rather innocent way.

Mirta is one of the hotel’s employees. She’s the personification of Latin American morals and propriety. For example it’s Mirta who stops the music when Helena dances to “Cara de Giana” in her night slip. It is she who constantly snickers and puffs at Helena’s relationship with Dr.Jano. The two women have a passive aggressive worker - employer relationship. This is present in all of Martel’s cinema and relates back to the inter-class relationships in Latin-America. It is a closeness always tinged by abuse, be it verbal or physical. It’s the same type of relationship that

exists between Mecha and Isabel, Veronica and the employees in *The Headless Woman* and Momi with Isabel in *The Swamp*.

Freddy, like Dr. Jano, is also a personification of confusion, frustration and emasculation. He works at the hotel and regrets not having completed his medical studies. Like Helena his marriage has failed catastrophically. In his relationship with Helena, Martel explores the physical relationship between siblings, which is never overtly sexual but is tinged by it. In an early scene, Helena sleeps next to Amalia. Helena's brother comes into the room, half drunk, Helena makes room for him in the bed. Martel doesn't identify him as the brother until later in the film. By obscuring this information the nature of their relationship is ambiguous. This gives their relationship a nuance, in which the brother functions as a bizarre substitution of the husband and father figure. Their relationship is signature Martel. It is intimate and full of innuendo.

## **Themes**

As in *The Swamp*, Martel touches upon an array of different thematic cores: the erotic aspect of religiousness, public and private life, shame, sexual repression, sexual discovery and sexual abuse. The film develops its themes in two different realms. These worlds collide and overlap, each one containing its own difficulties with no means nor will to help the other. The first realm is adolescence, Amalia's and Josefina's world. This realm develops in catechism, the hotel, the pool, the shop window and it's characterized by curiosity, confusion, innocence, religiousness and sexual discovery. The main theme of *The Holy Girl*, as Corbatta (2015) explains is "an exploration of the intersection between religious belief and the realm of the emerging sexual desire." Characters strive to understand the world around them, and within them. In an early scene Inés, tells the girls to "Be alert to God's call". They ask how they will know it's the call. The teacher has no answers, and in the absence of guidance they reach for the only explanations that are available

to them. Amalia finds her own answer in the stories of religious passion. Subverting traditional victim-abuser roles, Amalia reverses the roles and becomes the hunter instead of the prey. This is present in all the subsequent scenes after the molestation. The reversal of their relationship reaches a turning point in one of the pool scenes. Dr.Jano soaks in the pool. Amalia comes veiled behind a large plastic covering, her hand touches the plastic, and she stares at the unsuspecting Dr.Jano. Then she calls his attention, calling him by tapping her fingernails on a metal pole. He recognizes her and quickly tries to abscond. Amalia seems to beckon and play with her prey. The sound is heightened and echoes through the scene. Dr.Jano's next action is to hurry out of the pool and back to his room, where he waits for her. Amalia comes. Dr.Jano gives her money and tells her not to come back to the hotel. The scene has several layers. It pressures Dr.Jano and is a key moment for Amalia as she becomes bolder in search of fulfilling her "divine calling". At first she is shown scuttling, stealthily approaching Dr.Jano, often composed hidden or obscured by foreground elements. As the film progresses she is shown more openly as she gets closer and closer to Dr.Jano. In this particular scene. Martel chooses to veil her through a large plastic covering, then slowly she reveals her. The sound of her nails clinking on the metal also increasing through the scene. Finally, in the climax of their relationship, Amalia tells him "you're a good man" and holds him, but then she tries to kiss him, and he reacts, hitting her. Amalia is strangely pleased with the pain. Catholicism gives physical pain, both external and self-inflicted, a divine value. Pain is one of the central redeeming values of Catholicism. It is the currency with which salvation is purchased and saints made. Amalia's pleased smile is the culmination of her calling. She has suffered for the salvation of another, hence she has fulfilled her divine calling.

The adolescent world is also characterized by touch and hearing. Amalia and Josefina are very tactile towards each other, and to others around them. Martel integrates shots of Amalia engaged in touch, and also shots of either her listening or of her ears. This goes to prove Martel's effort to endow the girl's world with what she calls a tactile, sensual quality.

One of Martel's storytelling strategies is self-similarity, such as elements that mirror and resonate thematically with each other. It helps build meaning and form associations. The etherophone, for example resonates with both the tactile motif and the religiousness theme. Faith acts upon Amalia without being tangible, just as the theremin produces sound without the need of direct physical contact. This also contrasts with Dr. Jano's crime, which is abusive contact.

Spatially, Amalia's adolescent realm is best represented by the pool. It's one of the spaces with the greatest symbolic value. Water is used constantly in the film, from the light blue of the opening credits, to the teacher's tears, to the pool scenes and concluding in the final sound of rushing water, Martel uses water as a motif to suggest Amalia's purity and innocence, at the end of the film a rush of water is heard suggesting that this is also a powerful force.

On the other side of the spectrum is the realm of the adults. All the adults in the film are confused, frustrated and overly concerned about their public image. Adult relationships in Martel's films are all failed, frustrated or aborted. Confusion is the basic state of all adults. Their world is characterized by hypocrisy, the appearance and what lies beneath. They advocate religion and send their young to catechesis yet that religiousness is not present in the adult world. Even the catechism teacher delivers the lessons in a matter-of-fact way, avoiding questions and never engaging with her students. She sustains a flimsy veneer of morality that Josefina reminds us of. She brings attention to the teacher's love life, her involvement with older men, her ecstasy with them. Linked to this hypocrisy is fear of public defacement. This is one of the key themes of the film, the public image and the importance of maintaining appearances. Dr. Jano is the principal character with whom this thematic line is expressed. For example, once more in the pool scene, when he sees Amalia he quickly absconds, because he is at risk of being revealed as a sexual offender. He has no regret, no repentance, he only reacts out of fear of being shamed. However once Amalia follows him to his room, he confronts her. In private he can act openly. Dr. Jano,



behaves differently whether he's under the public eye or not. When watched he is meek, a weakling. When hidden by anonymity he molests Amalia, in private, he confronts her and he also gives in to his passionate feelings for Helena. The need to hold appearances is also expressed in a scene where Helena asks about what to wear during the dramatization. Another example is the elevator, which is used in four scenes in the film. In each one of these Dr.Jano is the main character. He is always accompanied by one or more people who gossip and judge others. They usually speak of decency, prudence, family, what should and shouldn't be done. The space itself expresses the constriction of public opinion, the tension built in the elevator scenes is brought to its peak when Amalia reaches out to grab Dr.Jano. After the scene at the theremin, Dr.Jano is constantly placed in danger of discovery, not only at the pool but also in the elevator and later in the baths where he discovers Amalia is Helena's daughter. Martel often mirrors stories, meaning using storylines that unfold in the background, but that resonate with the main narrative. This serves to bring attention to a story in the foreground. In a scene later in the film Helena, Freddy and Amalia sit at a table. Freddy tells them there is trouble between a girl and one of the doctors. Amalia looks down shyly. In this case the affair between the lively doctor and one of the girls resonates with the main plot line. Just then Dr.Jano steps in and sits with them. Josefina asks Amalia if that's him, she simply smiles back.

Shame, and embarrassment are not exclusive to Dr.Jano. They are part of every adult character in the film. The adults measure everything they do in terms of what others will think of them. Josefina mentions lice to a friend and her mother fires back at her saying "you're making me look bad". Dr.Jano does not act upon his urges because he fears shame and disbarment from his fellow doctors. Helena's brother feels shamed for not having studied more. Helena herself, always looks at herself in the mirror, and seeks approval about her appearance. The lives in the province are lived in terms of what other think them, in terms of how people speak of them. It is a quintessential part of Latin-American culture. Gossip and passing judgment on the individual's

actions. Ultimately Dr.Jano is unmasked as a sexual offender. With this Martel implies that a double life can't remain hidden.

### 3. THE HEADLESS WOMAN

*The Headless Woman* (*La Mujer Sin Cabeza*, 2008) is about class dynamics, personal responsibility and guilt. It builds a complex psychological state, where contradicting pieces of information are given to obfuscate the protagonist's state of mind. The character's unease is borne out of doubt whether she has run over and killed a dog or a person, and the guilt caused by running away from an automobile accident. Martel is outspoken about the relationship between this film and Argentina's dictatorship years. She argues that during this period the country was faced with something horrific and collectively the people decided to turn away. From this perspective, *The Headless Woman* is a synecdoche for the entire post-dictatorship Argentine nation told in the guilt fueled catatonic state of its protagonist.

#### **Narrative Structure. Syuhez and Fabula.**

*The Headless Woman* follows Veronica (Maria Onetto), a typical middle aged professional living in Salta. She has a husband, Marcos (Cesar Bordon), a large extended family, a lover and she leads a life of quiet desperation. After a middle class tea party, Veronica drives back. On her way she gets distracted by her phone and hits something on the road. She collects herself but instead of facing the accident and finding out what happened, she drives off. The film revolves around the aftermath of this event, as she tries to go about her everyday life whilst her guilt bursts through the seams. She enters a state of catatonic shock, where she ceases to function normally and drifts from place to place, from person to person like a specter. Marcos denies the accident and covers up all evidence. The story ultimately returns to the beginning. After all evidence of the accident has been erased, Veronica returns to her normal self and rejoins the Salta "high society" in a pool party.

The film is structured linearly, with a short prologue that also serves as a first act. Then it has a long, slow second act and a truncated short resolution. The film opens with a group of boys running, playing in the fields. They are dark skinned, have a roughed up dog and are dressed in old rags. They are the descendants of the native tribes of the Salta Region, the Kollos. They cross a street, a bus drives by, its sound as it passes is heightened, a visual and aural foreshadowing of the events to come. Afterwards Martel shows us a group of middle aged white women getting into their cars. It is the end of a tea party. On her way back Veronica hits something on the road. It is unclear whether it's a dog or one of the boys. This is the film's inciting incident, the moment in which the protagonist's life up until then changes drastically. After the fact, Veronica is in shock. She goes to the hospital, then home where she is perplexed, distant, and silent. Her state continues to worsen and she is reminded of the accident in every small detail of her normal middle-class life. Guilt continues to fester in her until she tells her husband that she has killed someone. He reacts and swiftly tries to resolve the issue by proving her wrong. Martel then starts to deepen doubt in the audience and Veronica by suggesting that it was in fact a boy that she hit and killed. Then she discovers that all record and trace of the accident has been erased by Marcos. Once the evidence has been erased, her internal struggle is resolved. She makes a superficial change of hair color and goes back to her normal self, safe from discovery and justice. This makes Veronica an extremely unsympathetic character. With Veronica's journey, Martel touches upon strong thematic cores of personal responsibility and guilt. From a filmmaking point The Headless Woman is an excellent demonstration on how to use the elements of film grammar to convey and deepen a character's inner state masterfully.

Martel herself has expressed her love and the influence that Hollywood B horror films had on her. If *The Holy Girl* was constructed as a twisted fairy tale, then *The Headless Woman* mirrors a horror film. It's a ghost story, where the ghost haunts Veronica's psyche. When Veronica visits her elderly aunt Lala (Maria Vaner) she is half-asleep and delirious. She says "don't look at him".

Right then a little boy moves into the background and looks at Veronica. The elderly woman says the house is full of horrors. When read as a critique on Argentine society after the dictatorship year, it recalls the specters that still haunt the country. As in Julio Cortazar's short story *La Casa Tomada* in which a home is slowly engulfed by the ghosts of the past, Veronica's life is overtaken by the memory of the accident, everything she sees reminds her of it.

As previously mentioned Martel's narratives are highly elliptic. In *The Headless Woman*, there is an entire story line that happens off-screen, which belongs to Marco as he covers up the accident. Like Veronica, the audience only finds out about his actions once she tries to retrace the accident. When she does, she finds out her car has been fixed, the files of her x-rays have been deleted from the hospital, and the hotel has no record of her stay. All evidence of the accident is erased off-screen. Her husband had reassured her that she had just hit a dog, but by erasing all trace of the accident the protagonist's doubt is deepened.

Martel rarely establishes relationships between her characters in a straightforward manner. Instead she allows doubt and ambiguity in the audience and only informs them piecemeal. For example, after the accident Veronica goes to a hotel where she meets a man in the evening. He asks "Vero, what are you doing here at this hour?" "I wanted a cup of tea" she replies but stays quiet when he asks "What's going on?" They go up to her room, she hugs him and pulls him towards her. As Jubis (2009, p.84) points out "We do not know the man's name and how he is related to Vero, except that they are lovers."

One of the challenges of cinematic storytelling is how to exteriorize the internal state of a character. In *The Headless Woman*, Martel achieves this through Maria Onetto's catatonic detached expressions and more importantly through audio and visual cues that remind both the character and the audience of the accident and its aftermath. For example after the accident

Veronica goes to the hospital, a woman steps in and says “the officer is looking for you”. Martel then cuts to show Veronica, in a close up, while in the background a police officer forces a convict out of the bathroom. This narrative strategy reinforces the sense of guilt and paranoia surrounding the accident. Proceeding with this logic, Martel is relentless, constantly reminding Veronica of what she did, turning even innocuous actions and comments into powerful prompts of Veronica’s cowardliness. This use of *mise-en-scène* as an expression of the inner state if not as strongly ubiquitous, are already present in *The Holy Girl*, and in *The Swamp*. It’s thanks to focusing the narrative on a single protagonist, that this storytelling strategy gains its full metaphorical and narrative power.

## **Sound**

In a 2009 interview with Scott Foundas for the UCLA Film & Television Archive Martel states that she aimed to create an un-real soundtrack, akin to horror yet only using sounds grounded in the reality of the diegesis. All the elements of the sound-space are used to express Veronica’s state of mind. Martel uses buzzing, humming, car alarms, sirens, electric and disconcerting sounds that go hand in hand with the dark, shadowy and moody visuals. For example there’s an uncomfortable buzz playing through the scenes with her lover. In contrast there is also the sound of rain and in certain moments the absent sound of running water. As discussed in the “Image” section of this chapter, water is an important visual and aural element. The sound of a storm and running water are suggestive of Veronica’s tumultuous inner state.

Once more certain sounds are heightened, serving as aural foreshadowing. The film starts with a group of boys running, playing in the fields, they cross a street, a bus drives by. The sound of the bus is greatly heightened. Or as a substitute for an establishing shot, as when Veronica goes back to the hospital Martel establishes the location with the sound of an ambulance siren.

In *The Holy Girl* overlapping sound was used to create a sense of connected spaces and claustrophobia, while in *The Headless Woman* this technique once more finds a prominent role, firstly connecting spaces and allowing to dispense with establishing shots. Secondly overlapping sounds that echo Veronica's state of mind, are often reminiscent of the sounds present in the accident scene (thuds, water, or a cellphone).

Martel uses music scantily, providing either an ironic comment on the situation or providing context. The first song is the late 80s song Solay Solay, which plays just before the accident and in its aftermath. Its silly lyrics and simple melody provide a stark contrast to the unexpected and sudden accident. The second is in a scene where Vero drives a worker-girl to her home in the lower-class part of the town. The place is dusty, full of unfinished buildings. Martel plays cumbia, popular, working class music over the scene that contrasts with the girl that holds a weeping woman that could be the dead boy's mother.

As in *The Holy Girl* the story's inciting incident, the event that puts the story into motion is caused by an element of the sound-space. In this case it's the sound of Veronica's phone that distracts her while driving and causes the accident in the first place.

## **Image**

The film's visual strategy revolves around Veronica and her state of mind. Martel explains that the visuals were designed to place the audience as close to Veronica's state of mind as possible, without using subjective, POV shots. The reason for this is both aesthetic and narrative. By not using fully subjective POV shots the audience is kept at a distance, capable of observing objectively, while still being close to the character. Veronica's state of mind is also conveyed by a very shallow depth of field. In an interview at UCLA Film & Television Archive (2009) Martel

explained that with this, she aimed to create a nebulae around the character, similar to the haze in which Veronica herself is caught up in. Martel's signature absence of establishing shots follows the logic of transmitting Veronica's dazed detachment to the audience.

One of Martel's signature directorial choices is her use of background actions that resonate and add meaning to her main plot. In the *The Headless Woman*, she uses a fallen athlete, a story of an accident, a buried pool, a faulty faucet and a spectral child. At the same time the sets are also used to further exteriorize the protagonist's state of mind, particularly the interiors. Her home is dark and full of shadows. When her husband arrives, she runs away into the bathroom and steps into the shower clothes and all. Her aunt's home is also dimly lit, with only a TV as a source of light. This visual strategy is driven by the need to express the protagonist's inner state. Visually, Martel also accomplishes this through, compositional choices such as cutting off the character's head or framing her in very tight close ups. Martel often singles Veronica out, placing her alone, framed within the frame and using elements in the background, such as water, to cue an emotional state in Veronica. Other props used prominently include a dead deer on the kitchen counter that is reminiscent of the dead dog on the road. Finally Martel uses visual distortions from mirrors, and curved surfaces to express Veronica's inner state. In the film's prologue Martel uses the distorted reflection of two women. External appearance is of great importance in Saltan society. Whether one is fat, slim, tall, short, brown or white, every detail is under scrutiny. The color of Veronica's hair is also used as a visual signifier of an internal struggle that is not allowed to resolve itself openly.

All of these elements of Martel's visual strategy are completely contained in the first sequence of the film. For this sequence Martel chooses to use a single shot, a passenger's point of view. The road is similar to where we saw the kids playing and thanks to the sound/image we infer she is driving somewhat fast. Martel avoids typical shot progressions. In most Hollywood films we



would be given a shot of the speedometer to indicate her current speed. Off-screen her phone rings, she turns back to get it, we hear a loud thump quickly followed by an abrupt movement. This could be read as a second hit or as the car's reaction to the first hit. This might appear to be a simple detail but it's in fact fundamental and at the very essence of the protagonist's dilemma. If it is in fact a second hit, she could have hit a person also, the kid and the dog, instead of just the dog. The ambiguity of the information provided gives the film its main tension. She comes to a stop, still in the same shot, *Solay-Solay* keeps playing, commenting ironically on the situation with its lyrics contrasting with the storm in the next shot. She doesn't leave her car. She doesn't wonder what it was. She simply drives on. There is a brief shot where we see the body of a dog laying in the middle of the road. This is a point of argument. Why use a shot where it is clear that she hit a dog? The shot gives the viewer information to which the character is not privy. The audience knows more than the character, seeing that she has in fact hit a dog. However the main character hits something (or two things) with her car and instead of finding out what it is, she decides to run away. That is the key piece of information, and that is why Martel chose to show us the shot of the dog. There is an accident, someone or something has been hurt, but she decides to pretend like nothing happened and tries to carry on as normal. After a long take, Veronica, stops the car. The shot is held in position, with the car in focus and Veronica pacing out of focus in the background, her head out of frame. The shot is a prime example of Martel's visual storytelling capabilities. The car, in the foreground reminds the audience of the accident. By keeping the protagonist blurred and with her head cropped by the frame, Martel expresses her inner state, keeping the audience at a distance, wondering what she will do.

Finally, *The Headless Woman* is also Martel's first venture into the widescreen aspect ratio of 2.35:1. Martel explains that after her discovery of the format, she wishes she had used it in her previous films. She argues that "the format allows a greater feeling of spying on someone". It also allows to contrast the screen's aspect ratio (with a greater width than height) to a person's (with

greater height than width), creating a connection between character and space that is not so palpable in more square formats.

## **Characters**

Veronica is the undisputed protagonist of the film. More so than in any other of her films, Martel completely focuses on her inner state. She's a typical middle class, middle aged provincial woman. She disassociates out of guilt and fear. She is a cowardly character that takes no ownership of her actions, making her the least sympathetic protagonist of Martel's films. In an interview with Scott Foundas (UCLA Film & Television Archive, 2009) Martel explains that when directing Maria Onetto she tried to eliminate any expression of guilt and forgetfulness. After her catatonic experience, the only change the character undergoes is her hair color. Her lack of responsibility for the accident make her a truly despicable protagonist. She struggles with the possibility that she might have killed a boy, detaches herself, enters a semi-catatonic state, and then she only undergoes a superficial external change before returning to business as usual, smiling and joining society. Despite being a horrid protagonist, Martel tries to coax sympathy and compassion towards the character.

Marco functions to expose Veronica, constantly asking her what's wrong. He attempts to ease her mind, taking her back to the place of the accident. He also erases all trace of the event, after certain pieces of information suggest that Veronica did in fact kill the boy.

Josefina, Veronica's sister in law, serves to mirror the protagonist. Josefina is what Veronica used to be before the accident. She is a typical middle-class wife and professional, whose life revolves around tea parties and pool gatherings.

Candita is a projection of Martel's teenage self. She plays a minute role in the film, but bears a strong resemblance to Momi from *The Swamp* and Josefina in *The Holy Girl*. She is also experiencing sexuality for the first time.

Tia Lala, Veronica's aging aunt, lives in a bed. Much like Mecha and her mother in *The Swamp*, she is an unpleasant woman, ever criticizing, and moralistic. She serves as a reminder of society's critical eyes, always surveying others in search for defects to expose.

Juan Manuel (Deaniel Genoud) Veronica's lover and Marco's cousin, he is an expression of the hypocritical life that is common in the middle classes. He also plays a part in covering up for Veronica after the accident.

## **Themes**

In *The Headless Woman*, Martel deals with class dynamics, personal guilt, trauma and the psychological effect of not taking ownership of one's actions. These themes reach their conclusion in the film's final shot, when the previously tormented Veronica rejoins society, visibly unscathed, only boasting a new hair style. In his analysis of *The Headless Woman*, Jubis (2009, p.96) states that: "In the ongoing process of self-definition, this new, brunette Vero is more mindful of the humanity of people like Aldo" (Aldo being the kid she likely killed). And that "Vero's social consciousness has developed as a consequence of the accident and its repercussions." This scenario where due to the trauma of the accident has somehow created an awakened social awareness in Vero is an optimistic one, however the film disproves this. In the final shot of the film, Martel cuts to a gathering of "Saltan high society". They eat and drink and revel, behind a glass door, untouched, undisturbed, the surface of normality left intact, beneath which there lays something rotten. This alleged change in her character is a superficial one, like changing one's

hair color, her so-called “social awareness” and its charity are entirely meaningless, based on guilt. It is an outcome where the true conflict between the classes, which is one of equal opportunities and access to justice is not addressed. Veronica represents that complacent, feel-good approach to class-differences. It is happy to apply half measures and small gestures that work as little more than palliatives. If her remorse were true, if she were truly repentant, she would go to the authorities and turn herself in, or go to the child’s family and throw herself on their mercy. This is not what she does. At the same time there’s no way to know for certain if in fact she hit the child at all. This is what makes the film so fascinating. Whereas in a typical mystery / crime film the occurrence of the crime would be clear, for example in Juan Antonio Bardem’s *Death of a Cyclist* (*La Muerte de un Ciclista*, 1995), the accident and the characters reactions to it are perfectly clear. Martel chose to obscure the exact details of the accident. By doing so the attention is placed on the character and her reaction. For Martel it’s not so important whether Veronica committed a crime or not. This is secondary to her reaction. That is what the film is truly about, the portrayal of a person facing trauma and guilt within a class structure that is blissfully ignorant of those less fortunate, in which the lives of the lower class do not have the same value as those of the higher class, where the lower class is never quite in focus (quite literally) always in the background, simple tools and workers, objects not subjects, and most painfully a class dynamic in which death and suffering are easily effaced and all things continue as normal. At the same time, in the context of Argentine history this acquires another equally important layer. As Jubis (2009) points out, the disappearance of the boy resonates with the “desaparecidos” during the military regime of the 70s. During this period, the privileged class enjoyed economic and political benefits and turned a blind eye towards the suffering of the lower class and those with opposing political views. That is what befalls Veronica. An atrocious situation, from which she runs away, trying to continue her life but can’t. When her guilt overpowers her, the other members of the class come to her rescue, and cover up the incident so that the status quo may continue as if nothing happened.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Having analyzed and broken down Martel's feature films into their film grammar elements, what are the specific elements of narrative, image, sound, themes and characterization that define her as a film auteur?

##### **Setting**

First and foremost Martel's cinema is essentially autobiographic. Her films originate directly from her experience growing up in the Salta province. Every aspect of her films is influenced by the particularities of that geographic setting and the director's experience in that place. As such Salta is prominently featured, not only as a backdrop to the unfolding narratives but its specific culture and heritage provide the source of the conflicts and nuances that characterize her films. Since Martel's films are highly autobiographical, it is accurate to say that the narratives, and the characters within them are also representative of Martel's own family and social circle.

The Salta province borders on Bolivia and Peru, and is as removed from the glitz of Buenos Aires as the country's geography allows. This region, of the altiplano has deeply rooted ethnic and class divisions that linger from colonial times. The descendants of the European colonizers constitute a minority middle and upper class that holds economic and political power while the lower-class majority is of indigenous and mixed descent. The interplay between these strata of the class structure have influenced and informed Martel's point of view and her cinema. At the same time and, as Jubis (2009 p.3) points out:

“No matter how specific the sense of place the films convey and how grounded they are in subjective experience, they illuminate universal aspects of being a person in the world and contain progressive prescriptions for living from which anyone can benefit.”

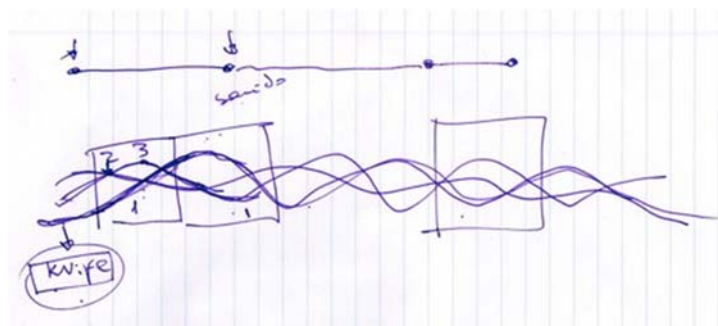
At the same time the specificity of Martel's rural world is used in a radically different way from other rural-set films. Since its early days Argentinian Cinema has romanticized the countryside as a place of cleansing, redemption from the vices of the urban life. In Martel's cinema however this does not happen. Her films are characterized by what Micheal Leyshon and Catherine Brace (2007, p.205) call "dark ruralities", where the rural space is not a place of redemption of cleansing but rather the space in which life is portrayed in all its crude primitiveness. That is, the place where a country's true nature is most honestly revealed.

## **Narrative**

Martel herself repeatedly states in interviews that she bases her film language on the use of layers, which is layering information, sound, image and plot points, so that the story unfolds through a cumulative effect of small story beats. Each image/sound contributing to our overall knowledge of the specific world. At the same time there is an internal process in the viewer where the accumulated image/sound information interacts with itself and with the viewer's inner world resulting in new qualities, new ideas and associations that enrich the experience beyond the screen. The process was described by the editors of the Russian Montage School of the 1920s, in particular Sergei Eisenstein, who thought that editing is a dialectic process, in which the collision of two opposed images yielded a higher value. In other words, there is a third quality generated by the contrast or superimposition of two others. The audience is sequentially exposed to pieces of information placed in a specific order, so that they experience a given story. In traditional narratives, found in most films, each scene and sequence fulfill a specific narrative function. For example, according to Frank Daniel's sequence method, a film can be broken into 8, ten to fifteen minute sequences, each one building, and progressing towards a climactic resolution and a denouement. In Martel's cinema this does not so readily apply. She distributes information and

plot points across scenes so that in any given scene, multiple themes, characters and plot beats are developed, often in a seemingly episodic way. In Martel's films every scene has multiple dimensions and strata. In an interview with director John Magary (2008), Martel called it "Layering". This means that, where in traditional narrative structure the story can be plotted as a gradient line, somewhat similar to half a gauss bell, Martel's films graphically resemble a lattice of narrative lines. In her own words:

"[...] all of my films are organized in layers. [...] Normally the structure of a film would be a single line: starts here, then this happens, then it evolves, then it ends. For me, it's like this ... [drawing a wavy line] ... this layer is a storyline ... [draws two more wavy lines on top of the first, causing overlap] ... and these are more layers, more storylines ... so that at any given time within the film, you have, say, three layers. Let's say that in one specific scene, there's one layer in the foreground, and then a second layer in the background, and then a third layer even farther in the background. This then evolves, and in a following scene, the third layer, which was in the background originally, then pops up to the foreground. And what was in the foreground now gets switched to the background."



1.1. Martel's sketch of her layering technique.

Martel constructs her films by superimposing several plot-lines on top of each other, each one starting and ending out of phase in relation to the others, and given more or less prominence in different scenes. This superimposition creates the lattice of Martel's narrative technique. In other words, exposition, character and plot development occur by a process of addition of small story bits. Like sediments slowly settling at the bottom of a glass or pointillism. Martel adds elements in different scenes that is once seen as part of a larger whole creating a final and lasting impression. In *The Swamp*, this moment comes when the boy Luciano presumably falls to his death. At that specific moment the film clicks and deepens its meaning, all the smaller events and bits of information coalesce into their full significance. Like an oversaturated solution precipitating, crystalizing into its thematic meaning. To accomplish this with the language of cinema Martel utilizes certain tools and tropes. Most commonly, repetition, reiteration, synecdoche and metonyms in both the visual and aural field. Jubis (2009, p.79) calls it "the synchronous occurrence of multiple events". She often blocks a scene in depth, meaning that she will stage action in the foreground, middle-ground, background and notably in the sound-space as well. "She likes to think of these actions or events as co-existing "layers" or threads that take center stage alternately" Jubis (2009, p.79).

As a result of her multilayered approach Martel can expose and explore her characters without being a slave to the necessities of fast paced plot driven narratives. And because she has ample room to explore her characters through the entire film, she shortens the first act of her films to a minimum, often the "inciting" incident occurs a few minutes into the film. In other classical structured narratives the first act serves to give the viewers a look at the protagonist's world before the story's events fully come into play. However Martel's narratives don't require this, since her films are built around the idea of observing, deconstructing the character's world, and creating analogies and relationships in that world. This is exemplified in *The Swamp* and in *The Headless Woman* where the events that "trigger" the story occur within the first 10 minutes of the film. This



takes longer in *The Holy Girl* as the underlying religious passion theme needed more time to explore before kicking off with Amalia's story.

However, this notion of working with layers doesn't exclude traditional narrative, in fact Martel uses a traditional three act structure within her own complex narratives. Every one of the layers in her films follows a structure of: normality-incident-intensification-climax-resolution. What differs from traditional narrative is that in Martel's films the plot points are not given emphasis, nor treated as the fundamental element that constitutes the film narrative. Instead she diverts focus to the characters, their interactions, their inner world, their looks, and the externalization of their inner woes. The plot points themselves are relegated to a secondary plane, bones in a fleshed out body. Second, more importantly, Martel's narrative strategy is elliptic, in the sense that she deliberately leaves out plot points from the diegesis. For example in *The Swamp*, where as in a hypothetical Hollywood film, the little boy's accident would have been played out as a major event with all the bells and whistles, with shots of the reactions of the parents, probably a mad rush to the hospital and a waiting room scene. Martel deliberately cuts away from the immediate consequences of the event and skips ahead to a powerful end where the accident's severity and our expectations are contrasted with Momi and Isabel just lounging in the searing heat next to a muddy pool. It is in that reversal of the expected narrative step, the way Martel skips the obvious shot, the obvious plot point that she surprises us with moments charged with deeper meaning. This narrative choice follows Martel's view that causality should not be the defining principle behind film narratives, but that film should reflect the random quality of life itself.

### **Sound-space**

Martel excels at utilizing the sound-space to create meaning, adding layers and nuancing her storytelling. Her use of sound vastly expands the film-space and gives her films their most

expressive moments. Her use of sound as a metaphoric instrument is in fact part of the original inspiration for this thesis. As Martel herself has stated in an interview with Amy Taubin for *Film Comment* (2009) she imagines the moment-to-moment sound of her films in advance and plans it meticulously. The visuals on the other hand are often improvised on set. One defining characteristic of her construction of the sound-space is the use of out-of-shot diegetic sound. For example the shots in the distance and the sound of thunder in the opening scene of *The Swamp*. The soft tinge of bells and the prayers of distant girls in *The Holy Girl*. The plain, matter of fact visuals are often elevated by sound helping to create the audio-visual metaphors that make her cinema a stimulating experience. Another common resource Martel uses is sounds that precede their corresponding image. By doing this, Martel opens the film-space beyond the restraints of the visual frame. This technique is reminiscent of how Robert Bresson used sound in his films, particularly in *A Man Escaped* (1956). Footsteps, the sound of glasses, murmurs in a hall, all gain a special quality. They are not simply the sound made by the object on screen but they hold in themselves symbolic power when juxtaposed with the other sounds and more importantly with the events in the visual-space. Concrete examples from her films include recurring sounds of rain, and water in *The Headless Woman* and *The Holy Girl*, the barking dog of *The Swamp* and the storms that foreshadow the events of *The Swamp* and *The Headless Woman*. All these sounds are always plausible in the diegesis, but by isolating them or heightening the viewer's attention to them they acquire meaning. This logic is also applied to her use of music. Martel never uses non-diegetic music. Her films are largely devoid of music, on the sparing moments when it's present, she uses it effectively to create plot points, and to add an ironic layer to the storytelling. Music is also used as a sensual or sexually expressive device, such as Helena seductively dancing in *The Holy Girl* or the song playing from the bar in the scene when Dr. Jano and Helena start to come together. Music gives additional emphasis to the action and frames the events, like in *The Headless Woman*, where the accident scene is set to the kitschy song Solay

Solay or in *The Swamp* in the dance scene where it softens the tone and creates a human moment between the family members.

## **Image-space**

Recurring elements:

Water, pool, storms, ghosts, entrapment, family, class differences, victimization, or abuse of someone in a position of power towards the weaker, appearances and hypocrisy.

Martel's visual style is sober and reflective. Her visual language uses shallow depth of field, it does not rely on visual flourishes and its pacing is deliberately slow. This gives ample room for the audience to ponder, consider and reflect about the narrative, the themes and the psychology of the characters. Martel also uses the visual field in depth, in a layered way, creating multiple planes of action. She mentions that she will block a scene with a background, middle ground and a foreground action and story and within the shot alternate the attention between the layers. This is usually accomplished either through the actor's blocking or with adjustment in the focus plane, as Martel prefers not to move the camera. Two of the most memorable examples of this aesthetic are in the closing moments of *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*. Both shots include the central character repeating a previous action. In *The Swamp* it is Momi and Isabel lounging by the pool after their cousin's accident. In *The Holy Girl* it's the main character swimming in the pool, innocently, blissfully unaware of the events around her.

Another type of image that is characteristic of Martel's approach is images of characters engaged in sensory perception. Martel isolates characters engaged in seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, with closeups or framing the sensory organ on their own. In, *The Holy Girl*, the

emphasis on these activities becomes even more pronounced by means of close-ups, of ears and hands for instance.

Water is a recurring element in all Martel's films. In *The Swamp* it was stale, murky as the family itself. In *The Holy Girl* it is a purifying force, and finally in *The Headless Woman* it is a signifier for internal suffering and the need for release. The importance of water as a story telling device is present through the entire film, in every major plot point, commenting and reflecting upon Veronica's inner state. It's a destructive force (the storm), and a cleansing power that Veronica needs and can't acquire. In a scene inside the bathroom of a hotel, she holds a glass full of murky water. The hotel manager says "its oxide, if you let it flow it goes away". The film is full of these types of remarks that resonate with the main character. In this case Veronica is like that murky water.

Stemming from her elliptic narrative strategy, Martel deliberately leaves out images with which to quickly understand a given scene. This is exemplified by the absence of establishing shots. Instead, Martel uses sound cues and evocative images that help the audience orientate themselves in space. It is visual connotation of information rather than descriptive images whose purpose on screen is limited to exposition. Places are joined by sound bridges or introductory close ups. *The Holy Girl* is particularly good at demonstrating this working principle. The film plays out in a series of places in the hotel and its surroundings, though we never see the town nor the hotel in its entirety but rather the film treats spaces as if single units, capsules, their own little stage. The room, the pool, the restaurant, the shop-window, each one its own confined world, only connected by the characters and sometimes by sound.

In regard to her camera-placement choices Jubis (2009 p.5) points out that : "Martel thinks of the camera as offering the point of view of a child who perceives everything that is happening in the

world-on-film but cannot form judgments about it yet.” Yet in her observations she has a sharpened analytical voice. She may view the camera as an innocent bystander but the editing and sound design in her films contradict Jubis, as the construction is always charged with a meaning and a critical point of view.

## **Characters**

In an interview with Scott Foundas (UCLA, 2009) Martel points out that she likes characters that are not defined in their nature, ambiguous characters who can't be easily summed up. This is the guiding logic behind her protagonists and of some of her secondary characters. Her characters are a cross section of the middle class. They all share an utter lack of agency. They are often victims of the story that unfolds in spite of them, the only notable exception being Amalia in *The Holy Girl*.

Martel's films feature a female lead character, a choice that has led critics such as B.Ruby Rich and Maria Puente to classify Martel as a feminist director. However it is arguable that this choice has to do more with her personal experience rather than with an interest in highlighting gender issues. Martel herself claims that gender issues are not her main thematic interest and as such she touches upon gender tangentially. Whereas in *The Holy Girl* and *The Headless Woman* the audience follows female leads, *The Swamp* lacks a single archetypal main character, Momi and Mecha are the strongest suitors for the position, as the film is skewed towards their points of view, and Martel herself has explained that Momi is a fictionalized version of her own 13 year old self.

Male characters in Martel's films play secondary roles. They are either failed parents, alcoholics, vain youths, sexually repressed or pedophiles. That is not to say that all men are shown to be one dimensionally twisted beings but that overall their negative side always outweighs the positive.

The only really fleshed out male character in all her films is Dr. Jano. Martel handles his characterization with the same care and nuance as she does her female leads. Although he is a pedophile and a sex offender, he is given the marginally redeeming qualities of fatherly love, and a teenage awkwardness in his attraction towards Helena. He also expresses his desire to be honest with Helena after Amalia has haunted him.

Children and adolescents are prominent in Martel's films. They are usually confused, with mixed up feelings and impulses of nascent sexuality. They also carry conscious or unconscious sexual desires for their siblings and friends (Vero and Jose in *The Swamp*, Amalia and Josefina in *The Holy Girl*). This characteristic continues into adulthood (Freddy's relationship with Helena in *The Holy Girl*). For Martel the youths are bound to replicate the mistakes of the previous generation. She nestles in them the negative values that define adulthood. For example Joaquin in *The Swamp*, is a brutish, violent and racist child, who will grow up to reproduce and propagate racism and violence in society. The child protagonists of her films, Momi and Amalia also have experiences related to their religiousness and their sexuality. For Momi the loss of her sexual interest results in the loss of faith, while for Amalia her sexual interest leads to fulfillment of her faith.

## **Themes**

Martel's films are thematically rich. They are metaphorical, critical and have allegorical undertones; *The Swamp*'s family stands in for the entire Argentine middle class, Amalia's plight in *The Holy Girl* is all religiousness and Helena in *The Headless Woman* mirrors the entire Argentine nation, turning away from the atrocities of its past. Martel's films are a result of distanced observation and very personal experiences. She is not judgmental but critical and with a need to understand. Martel is characterized by a profound humanism and curiosity about the intricacies

of the inner world and how it interacts and responds to the social world. In Jubis' (2009, p.3) words:

“Martel’s worldview borrows from the positivism of Auguste Comte. [...] to the notion that a “religion of humanity” would or should fulfill the role of fomenting social cohesion once held by organized religion. The films endorse a universal morality based on the commonality of human nature and the need to respond to human frailty and transgression with acknowledgement and compassion.”

Jubis’ statement is the key part of the discourse and drive behind Martel’s filmmaking. Her films are about people in search of meaning and understanding, and in the absence of answers they turn to that which is most readily available to supply them with comfort: religion, each other, their own sexuality, or the inner self. These are conflicts and woes that belong to the middle class and for Martel the middle-class is a decaying structure, full of perversions and injustice. Its mechanisms of power are in a rut but firmly rooted, unmovable. Martel points out the pitfalls of complacency, of how lethargy creeps up and corrodes as in *The Swamp* or how the middle-class sustains power and protects their own in *The Headless Woman*.

Religion, and faith are also recurrent themes. For Martel religion is a distraction that absorbs the characters and allows abuse to go unnoticed. Religion is a disappointment, a roadside show. For Martel there is no God. In this world all we have is one another and this realization is a crucial threshold that divides childhood and adulthood. For Momi it comes from her inability to see the divine, when God fails to listen to her prayers. In Amalia’s and Josefina’s world, religiousness is linked with curiosity, confusion, innocence and sexual discovery. They are locked in the intersection between religious belief and their emerging sexual desires. On the other hand, adulthood is infused with confusion and frustration. Adult relationships are all failed, frustrated or

aborted. Confusion is the basic state of all adults. Their world is characterized by hypocrisy, the appearance and the fear of shame, and embarrassment. The adults measure everything they do in terms of what others will think of them, and in how people speak about them. It is a quintessential part of Latin-American culture, gossip and passing judgment on the individual's actions.

Martel's thematic cores all stem from the middle class and its specific problems in relating with itself and with the rest of society. There are recurring themes of class, race, sexuality and religiousness, Catholicism, family and instinct. Her characters exist within a patriarchal society where class, shame and decadence collide in silence. It's a world of dysfunctional families, and where one generation inherits the vices of the previous one. Within this highly structured context the individual stands out as one of her greatest interests, the individual as a multidimensional being, Martel always carefully elaborates characters as to avoid stereotypical depictions. She has compassion for her flawed characters and depicts them under a human light. At the same time for Martel, the individual must hold responsibility for his or her own actions and is accountable to himself/herself and to others within a social context. In this way Martel is somewhere between Determinism and the accountable free will of Existentialism. Her films tread a fine line. Her characters somewhat despicable, flawed, utterly confused yet are always very human.



## **APPENDIX 1: Information about Lucrecia Martel**

### **Short Biography**

Lucrecia Martel was born in 1966 in Salta, Argentina. She studied at Avellaneda Experimental (AVEX) and attended the National Experimentation Filmmaking School (ENERC) in Buenos Aires. Martel is considered part of the "nouvelle vague" of Argentinean directors, who include Pablo Trapero, A. Caetano, D. Burman, U. Rosell, B. Stagnaro, S. Gugliotta and J. Gaggero. She directed a number of short films between 1988 and 1994, including *Rey Muerto (Dead King)* which was part of *Historias Breves I (Brief Tales I)* in 1995. In 2001, she directed her first feature *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*. It won awards at Berlin, Sundance, Havana, and Toulouse among other festivals. Since then, Martel has written and directed *The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)*, which was selected for competition at the 2004 Cannes International Film Festival and *The Headless Woman* in 2008. Currently Martel is completing a new film titled *Zama*, which is scheduled to release in 2017.

### **Filmography**

#### **Short Films**

*El 56* (1988)

*Piso 24* (1989)

*Besos rojos* (1991)

*Rey muerto* (1995)

#### **Television**

*D.N.I.* (1995), Documentary TV Series

#### **Feature Films**

***The Swamp (La Ciénaga, 2001).***

Written and Directed by Lucrecia Martel.

Produced by Lila Stantic

Cinematography by Hugo Colace

Edited by Santiago Ricci

***The Holy Girl (La Niña santa, 2004).***

Written and Directed by Lucrecia Martel.

Produced by Agustin and Pedro Almodovar

Cinematography by Felix Monti

Edited by Santiago Ricci

***The Headless Woman (La Mujer Sin Cabeza, 2008)***

Written and Directed by Lucrecia Martel.

Produced by Agustin and Pedro Almodovar

Cinematography by Barbara Alvavez

Edited by Miguel Schverdfinger

***Zama (2017) Post-production***

After *The Headless Woman* Martel was briefly involved in the development of an adaptation of the sci-fi comic *The Ethernaut (El Eternauta)* but dropped the project due to creative differences with the film's producers. In an interview with Jose Sarmiento Hinojosa, she explains that the production model for *The Ethernaut* demanded compromises to ensure the film's marketability, compromises that she couldn't accept. For that reason she left the project during its early stages. Martel's new film *Zama* is in late post production and scheduled for release in early 2017. The film will be her first to be set out of Salta. It is a period piece that takes us to the Orinoco river valley during the colonial era.

## **Awards**

Havana Film Festival: Coral Best Short Film; for *Dead King, (Rey muerto)*, 1995.

Sundance Film Festival: NHK Award; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 1999.

Uruguay International Film Festival: First Work Award – Special Mention; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2001.

Toulouse Latin America Film Festival: French Critics' Discovery Award; Grand Prix; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2001.

Havana Film Festival: Best Director; Grand Coral – First Prize; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2001.

Berlin International Film Festival: Alfred Bauer Prize; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2001.

Argentine Film Critics Association Awards: Silver Condor; Best First Film; for: *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2002.

Clarín Entertainment Awards: Clarín Award Film Best Director; for *The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)*, 2004.

São Paulo International Film Festival: Critics Award – Honorable Mention; *The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)*, 2004.

## **Nominations**

Berlin International Film Festival: Golden Berlin Bear; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2001.

Argentine Film Critics Association Awards: Silver Condor; Best Director, Best Original Screenplay; for *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)*, 2002.

Cannes Film Festival: Golden Palm; for *The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)*, 2004.

## **APPENDIX 2: List of other reference films (In alphabetical order)**

Almodovar, Pedro (Producer) & Szifron, Damian (Director). (2014). Relatos Salvajes. [Motion Picture]. Argentina and Spain: El Deseo

Bossi, Cecilia and Bossi Pablo (Producers) & Belinsky, Fabian (Director). (2000). Nueve Reinas. [Motion Picture]. Argentina: Patagonik Film Group.

Getino, Octavio and Solanas, Fernando E. (Producers and Directors). (1968). La Hora de los Hornos. [Motion picture]. Argentina: Grupo Cine Liberación.

Goyanes, Manuel (Producer) & Bardem, Juan Antonio (Director). (1995). La Muerte de un Ciclista. [Motion Picture]. Spain: Suevia Films

Harvey, Herk (Producer and Director). (1962). Carnival of Souls [Motion picture]. United States: Harcourt Productions.

INCAA (Producer) & Martel, Lucrecia (Director) .(1995) .Historias Breves I: Rey Muerto. [Motion Picture]. Argentina: INCAA

Morales, Jose Maria (Producer) & Llosa, Claudia (Director). (2005). Madeinusa. [Motion Picture]. Peru and Spain: Oberon Cinematografica.

Piñeyro, Marcelo (Producer) & Puenzo, Luis (Director). (1985). La Historia Oficial [Motion Picture]. Argentina: Cinemania.

Poiré, Alain (Producer) & Bresson, Robert (Director). (1956). A Man Escaped. [Motion Picture]. France: Gaumont Film Company.

Stantic, Lita (Producer) & Trapero, Pablo (Director). (1999). Mundo Grúa [Motion picture]. Argentina: Lita Stantic Producciones.

Stantic, Lita (Producer) & Trapero, Pablo (Director) (2002). *El Bonarense*. [Motion Picture]. Argentina: Lila Stanic Producciones.

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