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Motherhood in Crisis in Lucrecia Martel's Salta Trilogy

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Abstract: *The films of Argentine director Lucrecia Martel are among a number of recent works directed by women which, in the words of one critic, 'operate according to their own stubbornly private rules, logic, timing, sense of space' (Jones 2005). Such a description would seem to befit the female characters that inhabit Martel's on-screen world as much as the films themselves. Monolithic matriarchal figures, whose quirks, faults and failings reverberate through the generations, loom large in Martel's work. Yet, her style of filmmaking immerses the viewer in a distinctly childlike and fluid experience of being in the world, by eschewing establishing shots and other such orientating devices, and privileging the non-visual and off-screen space. This paper will discuss motherhood in crisis in Martel's first three feature-length films,* The Swamp *(*La ciénaga*, 2001),* The Holy Girl *(*La niña santa*, 2004) and* The Headless Woman *(*La mujer sin cabeza*, 2008), known as the Salta trilogy for their common geographic setting and semi-autobiographical concerns. It will examine how Martel employs adolescent point-of-view to explore filial relationships, and it will question how her use of sound, in particular, contributes to the ambivalence of the maternal in her films.*

Lucrecia Martel is perhaps one of the most celebrated writer-directors to emerge from the so-called New Argentine Cinema, Argentina's most recent boom in independent cinematic production, which began in the mid-1990s and comprised a significant departure from the aesthetics, modes of production and sociopolitical concerns of the cinema of the previous two decades. Her films are among a number of those directed by Argentine women who, in the words of one critic, "operate according to their own stubbornly private rules, logic, timing, sense of space" (Jones 22). This article examines the representation of motherhood in Martel's first three feature-length films: *The Swamp* (*La ciénaga,* 2001), *The Holy Girl* (*La niña santa*, 2004) and *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, 2008). It explores the ways in which these films depict the complex relationship between "the oppressive and the empowering aspects of maternity" (O'Reilly 9), or what Rozsika Parker refers to as "maternal ambivalence": "not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind" (17).

The subject matter of the trilogy is family life in the northern Argentine province of Salta, where Martel was born and raised. The films are essentially autobiographical in this respect, originating from formative memories and focusing thematically on "the transmission of dysfunctional patterns of behaviour across generations" (Jubis 6). Indeed, generational trauma—and motherhood in crisis, more specifically—have been significant features of the social and cultural imaginary of Argentina since at least the time of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), most notably in the highly visible involvement of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in the human rights movement in Argentina. The Madres, that is, mothers of the "disappeared"—women and men who were kidnapped and murdered by the state during the dictatorship—made maternity itself the vehicle for their political struggle. However, whilst their activism conforms to the task of using "their position as mothers to lobby for social and political change" (O'Reilly 15), it has been argued that their emphasis on

maternity locked women into traditional, marginalised and subordinate roles (Taylor 205; Guzman Bouvard 184). In a similar vein, I contend that, while Martel's films provide a strong critique of patriarchal motherhood, they fall short (with the possible exception of *The Holy Girl*) of presenting attractive alternatives in the form of "mothering";[1] that is, a notion of motherhood that "emphasizes maternal power and ascribes agency to mothers" (O'Reilly 13–14). What they offer instead, however, is a somatic representation of the mother-child relationship that is highly ambivalent and heavily negotiated through the medium of sound. This approach is somewhat ambiguous in that, while it subverts biological understandings of motherhood, it is nonetheless deeply rooted in bodily experience. Martel's depiction of motherhood also differs from that offered by other Argentine directors, such as Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story* (*La historia oficial*, 1985) and, indeed, the Madres' approach to maternity, in that, while it deals with motherhood in crisis (and the breakdown of the family more generally), it does so in a way that is not tied specifically to political circumstances.

I begin with a brief synopsis of each film before examining how Martel's distinctive approach to filmmaking immerses the viewer in a fluid, childlike experience of being in the world. Focusing on the use of sound, both in the formal aspects of her work and as a thematic motif, I demonstrate the ways in which Martel's soundscape evokes a crisis of the maternal in her films. I then examine how the elements of maternal crisis that are nascent at a sensory level re-emerge as thematic concerns of a moral nature when the films are read as a whole.

All three films, to greater or lesser degrees, present motherly figures in the midst of some form of personal crisis. In *The Swamp*, Mecha (Graciela Borges) drinks herself into oblivion while her teenage children and servants assume the responsibilities of running their decrepit rural homestead. While she frets and fusses over her lacerated chest (an injury caused by falling on wine glasses during a poolside afternoon binge), the children drive cars without licenses, hunt using guns and machetes, and tease one another incestuously. Installed in her bed, Mecha shouts orders and insults at the children and servants in turn, while lamenting her ruined cleavage. Her greatest fear is that she will end up like her mother, who took to her bed one day and refused to leave it again until the day they buried her. Both her youngest daughter, Momi (Sofia Bertolotto), and cousin, Tali (Mercedes Morán), affirm that Mecha is surely destined for a similar fate.

In *The Holy Girl*, Helena (Mercedes Morán) is struggling to come to terms with the news that her ex-husband and his new wife are expecting twins. Added to the pressures of overseeing the staff and guests in the hotel which she and her brother Freddy (Alejandro Urdapilleta) own and live in, this new crisis forms the backdrop to Helena's becoming unwittingly involved in an ill-fated love triangle of sorts: Dr Jano (Carlos Belloso), a specialist in hearing disorders, who is participating in a medical conference at the hotel, has molested Helena's adolescent daughter, Amalia (María Alche). Amalia, in turn, has become secretly infatuated with Dr Jano, whom she believes she has been divinely inspired to save. Meanwhile, Helena and Jano have developed a mutual attraction that can only end in their mutual humiliation, as Jano's assault on Amalia inevitably comes to light.

Vero (María Onetto), the protagonist of *The Headless Woman*, is perhaps the most enigmatic and ambiguous of all Martel's female characters. Disorientated and withdrawn after committing a hit-and-run accident on a remote road, Vero struggles to reinsert herself back into her normal life, before eventually confessing to her husband that she thinks she has killed someone. Her confession sets into action the mysterious mechanisms by which all traces of her accident are erased, one by one, even as it emerges that the body of an

indigenous boy has been discovered in the roadside canal where the accident took place. Whilst Vero's actual daughters are mentioned in conversation, their existence is notably absent and vague, living as they do in a town some distance away; thus Vero's motherly capacity is exercised towards the offspring of her friends and relatives, and the children she treats in a professional capacity as a dentist. As a maternal figure, Vero is a bundle of contradictions: "captivating but passive, sensitive and callous, wary and childlike. She fights for the truth of her experience only to settle for wilful ambivalence" (Hynes).

Adolescent Sensory Experience

Martel's distinctive visual and narrative style, in particular the way she uses offscreen space to create thematic layers within the narrative, can clearly be traced back to her formative years, when she began experimenting with a video camera by filming everyday life in the home of her large, middle-class family:

> When I was filming in my house … there was always somebody coming or going. [Often] I would stare at one fixed place and simply watch all the characters' movements. But sometimes I would switch to another person, and another, and it would go on building like that. The narrative lines occur in different layers but within the same scene … so the themes are superimposed on each other in layers. (Guest)

Although it developed somewhat organically, there is nothing accidental about Martel's filmmaking style; she has stated: "I always try to make the camera see like a ten-year-old child. I do that consciously, because that way I can observe things without prejudgment, with more curiosity" (Guest). One way in which this childlike perspective is achieved is by an almost total eschewal of establishing shots: "I never take those shots because it's very important to me that the spectator sees that things in the world are not as reason dictates" (Guest). Thus, establishing shots, with their emphasis on rationality, are replaced by their antithesis: the "breaking up of any and all spaces into their component parts … so that the geography becomes strictly tied to emotions and inter-psychic connections" (Jones 24). The absence of establishing shots makes greater demands on the spectator, who must actively participate in the production of meaning; in addition, Martel keeps nondiegetic sound and music to an absolute minimum, which, combined with the absence of orientating shots, results in a heightened sense of being immersed in the filmic world.

Martel's work has been described as cinema of the senses (Ríos 9); that is, cinema in which the visual, traditionally the dominant cinematic sense, is decentralised and destabilised, and greater emphasis is placed on the nonvisual senses, particularly those of sound and touch. In all three films, noises are frequently dislocated from their visual sources, and the sounds of nature—birds, rain, and insects—seem to infiltrate indoor spaces in an almost unnatural manner. In the opening sequence of *The Swamp*, for example, the separate soundtracks of rain, thunder, birds and insects are all presented at equal volume. Similarly, human conversations are almost drowned out by the sounds of nature, in direct opposition to filmic convention, which normally "make[s] the voice primary by modulating ambient sound" (Russell). The overwhelming presence of nature, combined with close framing of human bodies in indoor locations, has a disorientating, almost suffocating effect, as Dominique Russell notes: "The visual claustrophobia of the framing is organically reproduced in the soundtrack, where the natural world threatens to close in". Voices, in particular, are frequently disembodied, with the result that "words are often 'emanation

speech' … and are rendered, in a sense, as noise. Thus the narrative creates an effect of 'inside' and 'outside' at the same time; the spectator is both immersed and excluded" (Russell). I propose that this blurring of boundaries between "voice" and "noise" also brings about, at a more general level, a collapse of distinction between the human and the nonhuman, which has a bearing on the moral considerations of the trilogy, as I discuss below.

Martel's films are also replete with haptic images. There are numerous instances in which the framing isolates hands pressed against panes of glass, moving through hair, hovering over a radiator; or where the camera focuses closely on textures—fabric, skin, hair. "The haptic image", Laura Marks says, "force[s] a visceral and emotional contemplation [and thus] connects directly to sense perception" (163). Haptic cinema, therefore, "encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks 164). Hugo Ríos states that "one of the main characteristics of [haptic visuality] is the sensation of seeing something for the first time" (18; my trans.)[2] and he notes that, in Martel's films, "scenes are carefully constructed in order to bring about a sensorial epiphany" (20; my trans).[3] This is somewhat akin to the way in which the world is experienced during childhood and adolescence; indeed, Joanna Page notes that in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*, "the children carry out a series of experiments with sound and vision" that are designed to bring about just such an epiphany: "the youngest girls in *La ciénaga* recite lines into an electric fan that fragments the sound of their voices … [I]n *La niña santa* Josefina and Amalia discover how their eyes readjust to vision after being pressed shut" (187). The effect on the spectator of this haptic treatment of the image is the sensation of being immersed—not only visually, but bodily—in the adolescent point of view, in which the rational is rendered dubious and untrustworthy, and judgments are based purely on the emotions. Motherhood, as viewed from this perspective, is highly ambivalent, in the "complex and contradictory" sense indicated by Parker (17); it is often claustrophobic and threatening, but at the same time there is warmth and comfort associated with it. This ambiguity is brought about, in part, by Martel's bringing "questions of perception to the fore by insisting on the failure or the excess of vision, sound, or touch" (Page 187). For example, in *The Holy Girl*, Helena reluctantly undergoes a hearing examination at Dr Jano's request. Wearing headphones in a sound-insulation booth, Helena is instructed to repeat aloud a set of random words that are played to her. While she repeats most words correctly, her mistaking the word *madres* (mothers) for *males* (evils) suggests that, at least subconsciously, she identifies with the "bad" mother of patriarchal motherhood—that is, she who "by choice or circumstance [is] not the selfless and tireless nurturer of idealized motherhood" (O'Reilly 13). Indeed, Helena fits at least two of the criteria that traditionally have qualified women as "bad" mothers: she does not "live in a 'traditional' nuclear family" and she "could not protect [her child] from harm" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 3).



Figures 1 and 2: Haptic visuality: children's voices are made strange by the movement of an electric fan in *The Swamp*, Lita Stantic Productions, 2001 (left); the camera isolates hands moving through hair in *The Headless Woman*, El Deseo, 2008 (right). Screenshots.

The Primacy of Sound

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Martel's filmmaking is her unique approach to sound. For Martel, sound is given primacy from the very conception of a project: "Before I start to write, I already know how the film is going to sound. … In a way, images are what I strictly need to frame the sound", she has stated (Phelps). Given the sheer corporality that permeates her work (in *The Swamp*, in particular, the emphasis is placed heavily on flesh), sound functions, on one level, as a bridge between the corporal and the ethereal. In her films, sound is intimately connected with femininity and, in particular, motherhood. Russell notes that aural motifs are associated with several of her female characters, and often these point to a crisis of motherhood: "Whenever Mecha is on screen, telephones ring. Her inability to deal with the phone … point[s] to her slipping grasp on the external demands made of her". Similarly, Mecha's cousin Tali "is constantly straining to hear above the sounds of the children's shouting. The motif is at once symbolic and realistic: Tali is enveloped in the noise of motherhood and can hardly hear herself think" (Russell). These instances, in which sound is readily identifiable and attributable to a concrete source, contribute to the depiction of motherhood as oppressive and claustrophobic; there is, however, another category of sound which opens up the possibility of the films' engagement with the concept of "mothering", which I will now discuss.

Martel's films are replete with acousmatic sounds; that is, sounds "with no recognizable visual source" (Aguilar 90). These are present both in the films' soundtracks—taps drip; old plumbing emits clanks and groans; dogs bark from beyond a neighbour's wall—as well as being thematic features of the narratives. In *The Holy Girl*, crowds gather in the street to witness a musician playing a theremin, an instrument that works by manipulating invisible electric signals, while indoors, the students are being instructed to listen for the voice of God. There is also an inherent connection between acousmatic sound and motherhood, as Aguilar notes for the child in the womb, the mother's voice is "strangely acousmatic" (90). The child's first experience of the world outside the womb comes through sound, primarily that of the mother's voice; and there is a reciprocal quality to this mother-child sound dynamic, since sound is also the vehicle for some of the mother's first experiences of the baby in the womb. The sound of a heartbeat identifies a living presence, for example, and ultrasound technology uses sound waves in the form of echoes, which are transformed into a visual representation of the baby in the form of a sonogram. There is, therefore, something distinctly womb-like about Martel's acousmatic soundscape, which arises, perhaps, from how Martel "plays with the fact of sound's intimacy" in a way that sound is "not necessarily experienced through the ear, but liminally, on and in the body" (Russell).

In the case of *The Holy Girl*, the primacy of sound is formalised in the film's visual, as well as thematic, elements. The film's narrative crux is the medical conference taking place in the hotel owned and run by Helena and her brother Freddy, himself a medical school dropout. The theme of the conference is the clinical treatment of vestibular disorders, and this narrative thread is also emphasised visually through a deliberate placing of the ear in close-up and centre-frame in numerous shots throughout the film (Page 187). Martel has remarked that the ear resembles a shell; thus it is connected with the idea of water, another prominent feminine image in her work (Russell). Bodies of water (a swamp, swimming pools and a canal) feature in all three films and, like sound, they are highly ambiguous. In *The Swamp*, water, with its inherent association with conception and life, has a negative connotation in the stagnancy and putrefaction of the nearby swamp, which both attracts and repulses the

children, as well as the dysfunctional swimming pool, in which nobody dares to swim and which is the site of Mecha's bloody fall (Forcinito 112). In *The Headless Woman*, the rain that accompanies a sudden storm is described as "*una bendición*" (a blessing); yet, the flooding of the canal caused by this downpour fills the air with a foul stench. In *The Holy Girl*, the hotel's thermal pool is specifically associated with Helena; she once earned renown for her diving skills in its deep waters, but now the same water aggravates her hearing complaint.

Here, I propose that the close visual attention given to the ear in *The Holy Girl* has further significance in relation to the film's representation of motherhood in crisis. The ear has been said to resemble a small, inverted foetus; indeed, a branch of alternative medicine holds that, in therapeutic terms, the ear represents a microsystem of the entire human body.[4] In *The Holy Girl*, much attention is given, from the outset, to the presence of the unborn twins of the woman (referred to only as "that woman" or "Miguel's wife") who has usurped Helena's role as wife and, now, mother. These remote twin foetuses have a powerful psychological hold on Helena; they are not only symbolically present in the aural pathology that bothers her throughout the course of the narrative, but are made visible, tangible, and pervasive, by the exaggerated focus that the film's framing places on ears. Thus, the attention that is placed on the ear and, in particular, on the ambiguity of what is (or what is not) heard, symbolically points to a crisis in motherhood.

The Call

The connection between sound and the crisis in motherhood is further developed in what might loosely be referred to as "the call", a recurring motif throughout Martel's trilogy, which includes both literal calls—the telephone calls that pursue the female protagonists in all three films, which are consistently feared and avoided—as well as a more figurative call, which is closely related to the idea of vocation (or *calling*). As noted, in *The Swamp*, Mecha's refusal to answer the phone that rings incessantly points towards her inability to cope with the demands of motherhood. In *The Headless Woman*, the ringing of Vero's mobile phone causes her to hit a boy on the road while driving, and this same ringing phone seems to haunt her for the remainder of the film, as if it were the child's call from beyond the grave. Most of the time she ignores it; other times she answers, then immediately cuts off the call. In *The Holy Girl*, Helena receives repeated phone calls from her ex-husband's pregnant wife, which she consistently refuses to answer.

In these instances, the call is associated with fear or denial and is related to a crisis of the maternal intruding, as it does, upon what are perhaps these characters' idealised notions of motherhood. Amalia, the "holy girl" of that film's title, has an entirely different response to the call, however. For Amalia, the call is understood in terms of vocation, an idea to which she and her peers are introduced through their formal catechetic instruction, which, in true Catholic tradition, is specifically linked to motherhood. Amalia believes she has been called by God to save Dr Jano and redeem him. From the moment of their encounter in the street, in which Jano takes advantage of the pressing crowd gathered around the theremin musician to rub himself against Amalia from behind, she sets herself on a bizarre course of seduction tactics in order to bring about his redemption. Unequipped to decipher the letter of the law of vocation, Amelia responds, rather, to its spirit (Page 184). Her seemingly unorthodox response becomes, for her, a means of empowerment, through which she is able to break free from the negative patterns of crisis that are evident in the motherly figures that surround her.

The purity of intention in Amalia's response to the idea of vocation is emphasised by its stark contrast to that of her cousin, Josefina. When the girls' catechetic instructor, Inés (Mía Maestro), attempts to explain the meaning of vocation, Josefina's reaction subverts Catholic teaching. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Josefina plants doubts in Amalia's ear, whispering that Inés is not as pure as she would have them believe: she has been seen in an amorous encounter with an older man; surely she is having premarital relations with him. Unlike Amalia, Josefina applies a literal interpretation of Church teaching: paying lip service to maintaining her virginity, Josefina has anal sex with her boyfriend (who is also her cousin) in their grandmother's bed and refuses to turn and face him. Josefina's preferred positioning invites a comparison to the way in which Amalia responds to Jano's sexual advances; in her second encounter with Jano, she deliberately places herself in front of him, touches his hand, and then turns to look at him directly in the eyes, causing him to flee the scene in fear and shame. While her actions are evidence of Amalia's empowerment, they also emphasise the essential difference between her response to the call and that of Josefina.




Figures 3 and 4: Inés gives catechetic instruction (left) and Josefina casts doubts regarding Inés' chastity (right). *The Holy Girl*, Lita Stantic Productions, 2004. Screenshots.

Even though Amalia is confused about the meaning of vocation, her assent to the call she believes she hears is empowering, in that it allows her to move beyond the passive role of the victim to one of active agent: the saviour or heroine; an affirmative, rather than destructive, role. The women that surround her do not display the same power, at once tender and fierce, that is evidenced in Amalia through her ownership of the gaze and her active seizing of what she understands to be her calling. As Ana Forcinito has pointed out, Helena is always represented as the object of Dr Jano's gaze; his eyes linger over her bare back as seen through a bedroom window on his arrival at the hotel, and he watches her sunbathing beside the pool after a swim. Amalia's ownership of the gaze, on the other hand, is evident in the numerous instances in which she gazes and spies upon Dr Jano at the poolside (in direct opposition to the objectification of her mother), in the hotel elevator, and even in his bed while he sleeps, unaware of her presence (121). Like Helena, the other motherly figures of the trilogy who flee from the call seem locked into this pattern of passivity and ambivalence: Vero's motherhood is marked predominantly by absence—the absence of her natural daughter, who is mentioned, but lives some distance away, as well as the absence of responsibility for the boy she has killed; and Mecha is clearly destined to follow the same path as her mother. The final scene of *The Holy Girl* brings together and unifies the three elements of water, the twins and sound; in it, Amalia and Josefina float side-by-side on their backs in the thermal pool, and make echoes by repeating, "Hello, hello, do you hear?" The scene is a confirmation that Amalia is equipped to rise above the motherly crises that overwhelm the other women of the trilogy.



Figures 5 and 6: Helena is the object (left), while Amalia is the subject of the gaze (right). *The Holy Girl*, Lita Stantic Productions, 2004. Screenshots.

Maternal Ambivalence

The effects of motherly ambivalence in the Salta trilogy spread ripple-like through family relationships and beyond; thus, the maternal in crisis puts all relationships into crisis and throws the entire economy of familial relations into disorder. For example, the effects of Mecha's dysfunctionality in *The Swamp* (represented figuratively by the images of the swamp and the putrid swimming pool) manifest themselves in multiple disorderly behaviours among her children. Though at times forced to take up the slack of their parents' lack of responsibility, the children are consumed by chronic lethargy and boredom, spending the daylight hours throwing their sweaty bodies from one creaking bed to another. Two sets of domestic relationships are particularly problematic. First, that between the elder siblings, Verónica (Leonora Balcarce) and José (Juan Cruz Bordeu), contains a strong suggestion of incest. The physical closeness of the pair certainly suggests latent desire, if not actual sexual intimacy; furthermore, Verónica's glare reveals a thinly concealed jealousy when José announces that he is returning to Buenos Aires to his boss-come-lover, Mercedes (Silvia Baylé)—a woman twice his age who has previously had an affair with his father, Gregorio (Martín Adjemián). The sexual tension between the two reaches breaking point when José enters the bathroom and urinates while Verónica is taking a shower, then teasingly inserts his leg into the running water, while Verónica, wrapping the shower curtain around her naked body, quietly protests and tells him repeatedly to get out. José, for his part, is a sexually fluid character, and Martel's nonjudgemental camera often finds him in positions that appear compromising, but which subsequently turn out to be other than they seem. For instance, one scene opens with Mecha and José lying on Mecha's bed; José is leaning over his mother and facing her, the back of his head obscuring her face, so that all that is visible of Mecha is her bare arm and one thinly covered breast. At first glance it looks as though a passionate embrace is taking place between José and Mecha; only as the scene progresses does it become clear that he has, in fact, been putting a fresh bandage on her wounded chest. The naturalisation of such instances forces the spectator to question the reliability of what Martel's camera reveals regarding the nature of the familial relationships in this household.

The second problematic relationship in *The Swamp* is that of Momi and the family's indigenous maid, Isabel (Andrea López). One of the film's opening scenes shows Momi in a bathing suit lying on the bed beside Isabel, rubbing the latter's sleeve against her nose and lips, and repeatedly whispering gratitude to God for giving her Isabel. Isabel is ambivalent towards Momi's affections, at times extending the hand of friendship and even playing the role of surrogate mother, but ultimately rejecting her when she discovers she is pregnant and

decides to go and live with her boyfriend. It is Momi who suffers the most obvious damage due to motherly neglect (as the rash she contracts from the contaminated swimming pool water figuratively suggests), therefore her infatuation with Isabel might be seen as a response to this neglect—the desire for a motherly figure, which takes an erotic turn as she reaches sexual maturity. Momi's queer desire for Isabel, although it suggests lesbianism, is revealed to be something closer to an eroticised power struggle when Isabel does not reciprocate: as Pedro Lange-Churión notes, when Isabel leaves the family, Momi "utter[s] the same racial slur her mother spewed, [Indian slut]" (477). It is only when Isabel has gone that Momi rightfully directs her anger at Mecha and confronts her with the harsh truth that she will die in bed like her own mother, the very destiny she wishes most to avoid. Thus both of these problematic relationships, while they appear to be one thing, are later revealed to be rooted in a power imbalance that has its source in a breakdown of parental care.

Conclusion

The forms of motherly crisis that are nascent in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl* come to full maturity, so to speak, in the final film of the trilogy, *The Headless Woman*. Here, to an even greater extent than in the other films, the crisis is less one of biological motherhood than of its spirit—of *motherliness*. In one of the opening scenes, Vero's admonition to the child who has locked himself inside her car as she is preparing to leave a social gathering sounds like an omen: "You're going to suffocate", she warns him. Moments later, as she is leaving behind what we can only assume is the body of someone she has hit on the road, faint handprints are visible on the car window next to Vero's face. Doubt arises in the mind of the spectator: these could be the handprints of the boy who was seen running with his dog on this same stretch of road in the opening scene of the film; but surely they belong to the child who was playing inside the car. As Joshua Lund and Dierdra Reber note, however, "the doubt about this identitary doubling is disingenuous; we know that Vero has killed the boy we have earlier seen with his dog by the side of the road. … The doubt will allow us to pretend, along with her, that we do not know" (52), suggesting that the audience is complicit in Vero's self-delusion.

Indeed, the viewer is inclined to sympathise with the reaction occasioned in Vero's husband by her untimely announcement, at the supermarket checkout, that she thinks she has killed someone. Her husband's reaction is, as Cecilia Sosa has noted, one of discomfort and vague embarrassment; he glances around them in an effort to ascertain whether anyone has overheard the ludicrously self-incriminating admission that has just escaped from his wife's mouth (254). His explanation for what happened is similarly equivocal: "It was nothing", he insists, as they retrace her journey and attempt to locate her supposed victim in the darkness, "it was only a dog". Henceforth, like the twin foetuses whose ethereal presence seems to reside in the persistent ringing of Helena's phone, the child she must pretend never existed haunts Vero with every ring of her mobile phone—a jarring, dissonant tune that ruptures her newly recovered normality as sharply as it cut through the sunny, carefree rhythm coming from her car radio on that fateful day. The shadowy contours of that child take shape in the watery echoes of Martel's soundtrack, "echoes of Vero's crime: kids playing, ambulance sirens, cell phones chiming, and always water pouring, less cleansing than bringing dirt to the surface" (Phelps).

If Martel's camera deliberately "sees like a ten-year-old child", as she has suggested, then Vero's perspective is one of adulthood in full retrograde—a return to adolescence, since,

as Martel has said of *The Headless Woman*, "it's as if the whole movie were in her mind" (Guest). Regressive behaviour in adults is evident throughout the Salta trilogy; as Lange-Churión notes with regard to *The Swamp*, the adults seem "like aged children stunted in their emotional growth" (474). Indeed, Helena and Freddy in *The Holy Girl* frequently indulge in adolescent behaviour, stifling their late-night chatter for fear that the housekeeper will overhear, and climbing into bed beside one another like children, all but oblivious to their status as middle-aged brother and sister. As parents, they are also, at times, shockingly immature, as evidenced when Helena goads Freddy into making a phone call to his estranged children; a call which degenerates into a pathetically childish prank when Freddy hangs up without speaking, and the pair melt with giddy hilarity (Lange-Churión 475).

In Vero's case, however, the return to an adolescent state of mind is more sinister. Although it initially manifests as a reaction to the shock of the car crash, her regression to adolescence represents an abject moral failure; a crisis of motherliness which concludes in the voluntary surrendering of her autonomy. Vero's return to work at her private dental practice following the crash reveals the initial signs of her regression; more vacant than disorientated, she takes a seat in the waiting room alongside her own patients, and seems not to understand what is expected of her until her assistant dresses her in her dentist's uniform. Whilst she gradually recovers a professional demeanour, it is in Vero's private world that the true extent of her new absence-of-self becomes apparent. The car has been removed without her knowledge, sent away by her husband to be repaired, and her influential cousin (and secret lover) is making phone calls to ensure there is no trail of evidence. These are the "adults" who will take care of everything; they "deny the truth of her experience but give her a cover", as Eric Hynes notes; but "the horror is watching Vero accept the easy, life-negating lie as truth". Vero, it is assumed, can be fixed in much the same way as the dented car; "it's nothing", her husband assures her, echoing his earlier evaluation of her roadside victim, "they hammer it a little from the inside." Opting for adolescent impunity instead of empowerment, and exchanging her agency for willful ambivalence, Vero also submits to that hammer.

Notes

[1] Andrea O'Reilly distinguishes between "motherhood" as a patriarchal institution which "normalizes and naturalizes oppressive motherhood as the best and only way to mother" and the notion of "mothering", which "emphasizes maternal power and ascribes agency to mothers" (13–14).

[2] "Una de las características principales de este tipo de visión es la sensación de estar observando por primera vez" (Ríos 18).

[3] "escenas como la anterior, cuidadosamente estructuradas para traer a primer plano una epifanía sensorial" (Ríos 20).

[4] Auricular acupuncture, or auriculotherapy, is based on a theory inspired by the foetal shape of the human ear ("History of Ear Reflexology").

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