

Murnau Film Prize 2019

## **A Margin of Indefiniteness—A Laudation for Lucrecia Martel**

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If Hollywood is regarded as the powerhouse of fictional filmmaking, the Salta Province in the mountainous northwest of Argentina is certainly one of its more remote outposts. It is a border region, roughly 1,500 kilometers from the capital: Bolivia, Paraguay, and Chile are close by. Lucrecia Martel grew up here, and this is where her first three feature films lead us: the *Salta Trilogy*—and her latest film, *Zama*, which the filmmaker herself calls a “border movie,” also goes to the extreme border of the country with Paraguay. The “decentralized experience” (Kate Dervishi) that these films expose us to corresponds to the special way in which the images are framed here. Figures are often cut and positioned at the edges of the frame, which has allowed critics to compare Martel’s visual compositions with those of Michelangelo Antonioni. The peripheral zones through which Martel’s figures move correspond to the emotional and psychological boundaries in which they find themselves.

In accordance with the “decentralized experience” of her work—also in view of the great importance attached in it to the small gestures, the secondary figures, the details—I propose an approach to its center via its edges. You may be astonished—but astonishment is precisely what Lucrecia Martel’s unique work evokes.

In *Muta* (2011), young women form a dreamy community on a ghostlike riverboat, apparently abandoned by the male crew: a sensual choreography of close-ups of the female body, a lascivious, erotic play with their attributes—clothing, shoes, handbags, glasses—a midsummer night’s dream, liberated from the constraints of narrative causality, at the same time permeated by an uncertain, intangible threat. Like larvae, the young women emerge from the portals of the ship’s hull. The insect-like movements of the women with their wasp waists—Martel herself spoke of them as “bugs”—butterfly-shaped glasses (strikingly similar to those of the director), a blink of an eye in close-up like the flap of a butterfly’s wings: All these moments transform the models, who as agents of the fashion industry are supposed to define femininity, into something different, in certain moments into something almost monstrous. — *Muta*, Lucrecia Martel’s short film for the fashion brand Miu Miu, not only undermines the conventions of advertising or image films, but also transcends the products it is intended to advertise in an irritatingly seductive miniature about

the bliss and horror of metamorphosis, the transformative power of femininity. A gust of wind blows two false eyelashes out of the frame, fireflies dance in the dark. — Fashion glares. Lucrecia Martel's style glows.

If you have seen only this, you will understand that, a few months ago, the musician Bjørk was able to win over Lucrecia Martel for the production of her "Cornucopia" show in New York: "I have admired [Martel's] work for a long time," Bjørk explains, "and cannot believe my blessing to have her here to complete this utopian world of ours."

*Muta*—which in Italian describes the molting of an insect and in Spanish is the imperative "mutate!"—has a somber, big brother in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*—and a playful, burlesque little sister in Martel's short film *Pescadores* (Fish), realized one year earlier. Here, we meet a school of carp, which blabber on with individually colored, human voices, but do not dream of being people, but rather cars. While we look into the gaping mouths of the fish, we hear stories, embedded in a musical composition of similarly strange beauty, that the chatty fish tell about their lives as cars. Their need to communicate is considerable, and time and again they seem to push each other out of the frame to bring their words to the audience. In *Pescadores*, visual excess and cinematic minimalism intertwine. It is a film like a one-liner, shot largely in one take; low-key, yet with garish comedy, yet nevertheless part of the oeuvre of an auteur filmmaker who, by 2010, had long-since been established and has been celebrated internationally for her subtle character studies.

The sovereignty with which the artist snubs expectations here is breathtaking. It is also an expression of Martel's conviction of the equivalence of artistic means, forms, and cadences. Common hierarchies, often unquestioned—such as the dominance of the long over the short, the filmic image over the sound—are often undermined in Lucrecia Martel's cinema. At the same time, despite its unusual style, the film corresponds with themes and motifs from Martel's feature films: with questions of identity, for example, the transgression of human experience, the relationship of the individual to the group, Martel's investigation of viewership, and her recurring use of the child's perspective, even with the leitmotif of water.

We vaguely recognize Martel's silhouette on the moving water surface, just as one might suspect that it is the shadow of the filmmaker's hand that tenderly falls on the body of her partner Julieta Laso in her video for the tango *Fantasmas*. Is it possibly Martel's own home videos that flicker across Tía Lala's monitor in *The Headless Woman*? And does a painting of Martel's grandmother hang on the set of *La Ciénaga*? It is the discreet charm of such (possible) personal inscriptions that repeatedly lends the artist's work an autobiographical note.

Lucrecia Martel's first three feature films, the *Salta Trilogy*, also have a background of personal experience: They are nourished by the multitude of stories from the region from which they originate and in which people enjoy telling stories. Born in Salta as the daughter of a conservative middle-class family, she began making video recordings of family life at the age of fifteen. The films of the *Salta Trilogy* translate and extend these investigations into the realm of fictional film, or more precisely into the realm of "critical fiction," as Dominique Russell formulated in her analysis of Martel's work.

Focused on the cultural center of the country, Buenos Aires, Argentine cinematography had overlooked the rural region in the north; it was Martel's films *La Ciénaga*, *La niña santa*, and *La mujer cin cabeza* that opened this territory to cinema. Martel belongs to a generation marked by state terror, military dictatorship, and recurring economic crises, which shook the middle class and its self-image, also by a poisoning of language by a mendacious political rhetoric. All this has an effect on the psychology of her characters. But the political reality of the country and its history is articulated in a mediated way in Martel's trilogy: in the disregard of the serving indigenous population groups by the white middle class, for example—the repression of a historical debt that has not been resolved. Between plot-driven telenovelas with their one-dimensional characters on television and the American mainstream in the cinema, which had been hijacked by it during the military dictatorship, Young Argentine Cinema developed with Lucrecia Martel as a *prima inter pares*, revealing the wounds of injured cultural identity (or rather identities).

Martel's intimate knowledge of the milieus to which her trilogy is dedicated could lead us to expect sober, critical social studies from the films. But with their artful *mise-en-scène*, the opulence of their details, the polyphony of voices, noises, and music, their proximity to the phantasm, they also seem to me more akin to the moral paintings of William Hogarth, who in the early eighteenth century with his group portraits of English families, the so-called "conversation pieces," created revealing representations of the customs of particular social groups. Based on relentless observation, they transferred these into the realm of free artistic invention. Martel confesses that she clearly distanced herself from certain positions in arthouse cinema that attempt to use blueprints of reality, but generally merely imitate the simplistic binary oppositions of neorealism:

"I don't believe in the idea that cinema should reflect reality. I believe in the opposite. [...] What interests me about cinema is that this voluntary artifice allows us to see to what extent reality is actually constructed." And, elsewhere: "I like the wrong in cinema, the lies, the artificial. That's

what is fascinating about cinema. And sometimes I don't understand the directors who search for truth. For me, it's so banal to despise falsehood with all its power."

Martel's delight in the suggestive, indeed manipulative power of the cinema finds expression in her work—otherwise poor in metaphors—in the symbol of water, which runs through the films in many variations. The correlation between water and the cinema is expressed most clearly in the final image of *La niña santa*: a view of a swimming pool, the rectangular boundary of which corresponds to the ratio of the screen, and its content, water, the seductive, absorbing, immersive power of the moving image. Martel's films are invitations to dive from the real into another, magical, confusingly ambiguous sphere. The very fact that the other shots of the *Salta Trilogy* are filmed at the eye level of an eight-year-old child endows this final image from an elevated position with something special, something emblematic.

A detail from the set of *La Ciénaga*, Martel's first film: In an interior, an oil painting of a snow-covered mountain landscape. Martel once said that her grandmother appreciated such motifs because they gave her the impression of the "European." "Europe is best remembered by those who were never there," says Luciana in *Zama*, Martel's most recent film. — *La Ciénaga* is a film about the gap between imagination and reality, the blind spots of perception. What is the basis of the self-image of the middle-class family, which kills time between lethargy, alcohol excesses, the cultivation of self-importance, and racist resentments against "the Indians" at the dilapidated pool? When a television team arrives to document an apparition of Mary, nothing can be seen except the dingy water tank on which the Mother of God is said to have stood. And when little Luciano tries to check the accuracy of a gory scare story, he pays for his curiosity with a fatal fall. A one-eyed boy seems to personify the partial blindness that reigns here. — Gunshots, bleeding wounds, thunder: The civilized, bourgeois world of *La Ciénaga*, the "morass," is more archaic, more primitive than it perceives itself to be; the transitions from human to animal are fluid.

Robert Bresson: "What is for the eye must not duplicate for the ear. [...] Image and sound must not support each other but must work each in turn through a sort of relay." The gap between imagination and reality manifests itself in Martel's films in a particularly artistically impressive way in the separation of visual representation and auditory information: She juxtaposes the powerful dominance of the visual in the film with "the unknown darkness of the sonic realm" (Kate Dervishi). Martel often develops the visual design of her films out of sound concepts, which she has been implementing since her debut with the congenial Guido Berenblum; a single continuously falling sequence of pure tones in *Zama* is enough for him to translate the drama of

an unstoppable decline into an acoustic signal. The richness of Lucrecia Martel's work, especially in terms of exploring the possibilities of sound, also reveals to what extent the rest of contemporary cinema remains below its potential.

"What is it, Lord, you command of me?" — Still without an image, under the opening credits of *La niña santa*, the bright voice of a young woman; she sings a chorale about the Annunciation. Only after the image of the audience does one see an image of the singer: her face, moved; a tear flows. She is surrounded by other young women who are shown in static shots, like the details of a group in a Rembrandt painting. During a medical congress in a remote, dilapidated family hotel, we see the teenager Amalia on her mission to save Dr. Jano, a middle-aged physician who had made sexual advances on her, a mission paired with repeated attempts by Amalia to seduce the physician. Notions of choice and religious vocation, the belief in miracles, rumors and gossip intertwine with moments of sexual desire, as sounds from outside and inside intertwine, stories overlap, often more whispered than told, the group of physicians commingled with the adolescent girls. Male authority, represented by the physician/priest, the power of the word, is undermined by a polyphony of female whispering—a soundscape "designed to inspire reverie" (Martel). Amalia's desire is mirrored in that of her mother: They both vie for the same man. In *La niña santa*, Martel creates a magic mirror maze: bodies fragmented in close-ups, back views, heads cut off by the camera, the equal status of the figures, not least the polyphony of sound, on and off-screen. All these artistic deviations from the representational standards of narrative film trigger in the viewer a heightened awareness of form. In one of her essays, Susan Sontag highlighted the lasting impact of this mode of reception:

"Awareness of form does two things simultaneously: it gives a sensuous pleasure independent of the 'content,' and it invites the use of intelligence. [...] Ultimately, the greatest source of emotional power in art lies not in any particular subject matter, however passionate, however universal. It lies in form. The detachment and retarding of the emotions, through the consciousness of form, makes them far stronger and more intense in the end."

Let me add to Sontag's words that consciousness of form also opens and sharpens our senses, keeps them alert. Martel's elliptical narrative, her subtle art of suggestion and omission, not least of all her characters, who are not illuminated into the most remote corners of their psyches: They demand an active spectator. The face of a catatonic schizophrenic that we see in Martel's festival trailer for this year's Viennale she mostly hid behind a thick veil of pixel clusters as if to protect it from the scholarly scrutiny that generated this shot from the early 1960s; it is one single restlessly

wandering eye of the patient alone that looks out from the digital bandage. Martel's characters could have been designed by the Caribbean philosopher Édouard Glissant, who postulated the basic human right to opacity. They remain in the penumbra. "The ambivalent world of darkness, in which one can have no sense of certainty, is exactly the world that I prefer. Because this world doubts and is ambiguous," Martel explains. "Respect man's nature without wishing it more palpable than it is," Robert Bresson reminded us, and in an art based on showing, had preserved "a margin of indefiniteness." Susan Sontag had elaborated on this maxim in her essay on him: "All identification with characters, deeply conceived, is an impertinence—an affront to the mystery that is human action and the human heart."

Instead of demanding that we identify, Martel's films involve us in other ways: Various authors have spoken of a kind of "contagion," others of "entanglement." Often, it is fleeting, seemingly trivial moments that trigger this contagion, which gradually spreads to all elements of the film, becomes epidemic, and is also transferred to us as viewers.

It is just such a brief instant, a moment of carelessness, which thrusts *Véronica*, *The Headless Woman*, into a whirlpool of guilt, denial, and the return of the repressed. Did she possibly not only run over and kill a dog, but also its young owner? We, the audience, saw him at the beginning of the film; *Véronica* did not see him, committed a hit and run. More and more, her smoldering identity crisis leads us into an area of dark suspicion and growing instability. It is this kind of "contagion" that gives Martel's cinema its mesmerizing intensity, which is more interested in *states* than *stories*. Once again, it is the sound design that brings this about in the most suggestive way: a sound "as if one were in the head of the protagonist, like in an SUV, encapsulated, [...] as if the sound around *Véronica* were resounding with her own self," Martel explains the concept.

"That voice does not sound like yours," *Véronica* is told by her old, bedridden Aunt Lala, who has a penchant for the supernatural. The evidence against *Véronica* becomes more solid, but the disappearance of a boy from the favela is quickly forgotten due to the great rain, which causes flooding and costs human lives. *Véronica* threatens to fall out of her role, but the staff at home and in the practice, the husband and cousin, calm her down and give her more self-confidence: "Don't worry. It was nothing. Just a scare." The SUV is repaired, *Véronica*'s blonde hair is dyed black, and worn T-shirts are given as charity to the brother of the victim. The aunt, who feels surrounded by the dead, advises: "Ignore the dead. And they are leaving." Life goes on. — Does it?

Or is it possible that *Véronica* herself has long since become one of these dead? In the hotel where she stayed after the accident, she is not remembered; the x-rays she took after the accident are

untraceable. — *The Headless Woman* is one of the great ghost films of cinema—and may be mentioned in the same breath as the masters of this genre: Carl Theodor Dreyer, Jacques Tourneur, and Herk Harvey, as well as—of course—Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau.

Every literary film adaptation that strives for autonomy and does not wish to encounter its original in a state of subservience, is an act of artistic piracy. Let us recall Murnau's visually powerful adaptation of Goethe's canonical, almost sacrosanct *Faust* into a medium still suspiciously eyed by the cultural middle classes at the time, Christian Petzold's bold visualization of the migration theme of Anna Segher's *Transit*, and of course Lucrecia Martel's interpretation of Antonio di Benedetto's 1956 novel *Zama*, which widens the narrative perspective. — The story of the colonial official Diego de Zama, who, at an outpost of the Spanish empire on the Argentine border to Paraguay, hopes for long-overdue remuneration, promotion, and then—increasingly desperate—a transfer, is the story of a failure. Martel tells this story of waiting, futility, powerlessness, and a final flight into the heart of darkness, in a tone that unites moments of compassion and tender derision for the tragicomic figure of the colonial lord. We see him standing on the banks of the Rio Paraná, in a pose reminiscent of the painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, but Zama's gesture of pathos remains hollow, a desperate travesty, and the sea-like surface of water in front of him is not capable of forming an image of longing: The river marks nothing but the topographical boundary that Zama has long since reached inside himself. No ship will come. The modest insignia of the crown's power are not capable of unfolding any symbolic power on muddy ground contaminated with cholera, in humid heat, and in interiors populated by llamas. His saber, as a relic of the furor of Zama's conquistadors, his last symbol of male defensibility, is taken from him without a fight by that Vicuña Porto whose arrest was supposed to be Zama's tragic, final attempt at self-empowerment. At the beginning of the film, we see him alone on foreign territory eavesdropping on a group of naked, indigenous women chatting until they discover him and drive him away: Already here, the idea of a justification of white male supremacy has shrunk to a presumptuous, ridiculous assertion. The sources of guilt and repression that drive the characters of the *Salta Trilogy*: They lie here. Martel knows that the whites "bestowed" freedom onto the enslaved in order to put them in their debt with this act of perverse reversal and thus absolve themselves from it. According to Martel, the sources used for the research on *Zama*, products of white historiography, were therefore studied with suspicion. While the literary model had concentrated on Zama's inner monologue, Rui Poça's panoramic film images show the indigenous people on whose exploitation white rule is based. Ethics and aesthetics are inseparable in the work of Lucrecia Martel.

In *The Last Man* from 1924, Murnau's study of a degradation, he was forced to follow up the decline of his main character with a happy end—albeit blatantly exaggerated. Zama's loss of self through the narcissistic affront he was forced to endure seems irreversible: *Él muta*, he mutates. In the feverishly delirious conclusion of the film, a grotesque dance about masks and identity, no one knows who is who anymore. — Martel is well aware of the fact that, whereas the devastating experience of one's own failure is the toxic core of a crisis of masculinity, women cultivate a much more productive approach to failure: "In the history and upbringing of women, it is common for things not to succeed. Change of plan is the standard. [...] Failure is so much part of a woman's plan. It has triggered a great deal of interesting things in female thinking."

Her own unorthodox cinematographic thinking has long since made Lucrecia Martel one of the most sought-after discussion partners in film. I recommend her talks and master classes, many of which can be seen on YouTube, as well as her printed interviews. Her unpretentious and unassuming, often humorous reflections, always based on the concrete object, the artistic work with sounds and moving images, and illustrated in her films by exemplary moments, already have for me the status that Truffaut's interview with Hitchcock has for those interested in film. What, in Robert Bresson's collection of texts *Notes on the Cinematographer*, from which I quote, is the most stringent essence and strict maxim, which makes do with few words, is, in Martel's case, embedded in memories of the situation of research or on the set, also in reminiscences of her own childhood, but has nothing less substantial to offer about the medium (and much more that goes beyond this). Here, the art of filmmaking is conveyed as a highly complex conglomerate of personal experience, memory, and vision, of a critical questioning of the given, and the thoroughly experimental sounding out of alternatives, of research, concept, increased sensitivity on the set, obsession with detail, and modifications of the intended, that is to say of "change of plan," as well as of surprising coincidences.

"I refuse to consider myself a filmmaker," Lucrecia Martel stated last year, "I think it's because I don't know that much about cinema." Full of admiration for both the work and the person, the jury of the Bielefeld Murnau Film Prize contradicts Lucrecia Martel reluctantly, but all the more resolutely in this one point. — Congratulations!