NADJA ABT

## IN THE SWAMP: ON LUCRECIA MARTEL'S "LA CIÉNAGA"

Lucrecia Martel, "La Ciénaga," 2001, film still

I would like to recommend rediscovering the films of the famous Argentinean director Lucrecia Martel. *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*) from 2001 is the first installment in her cinematic Salta trilogy, which includes *La niña santa* (*The Holy Girl*, 2004) and *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008). Her tragicomic films always unite a multitude of female protagonists: from the girl who, insecurely, wants to emancipate herself from the adult world, to the pubescent teenage daughter who interprets the sexual assault of an older man as proof of love, to the middle-aged woman who, in a cynical and blasé fashion, drowns her illusions of a better life in alcohol. The mostly macho men are relegated to supporting roles.

The first ten minutes of Martel's first feature film, *La Ciénaga*, are unforgettable. The film takes place in late-1970s Argentina, during the period of the military junta. Two related families from the upper-middle class spend the summer near a town called La Ciénaga in the province of Salta, which borders Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay. In the seemingly unbearable sultry heat, a Chekhov-like scene of phlegmatic, permanently drunk adults, their children, and their relationship to the indigenous domestic workers unfolds. The film does not adhere to a linear narrative style, and so the sometimes-incestuous relationships of the individual characters to one another only become clear about halfway through the film. In the meantime, the plot oscillates between Catholic mystical apparitions and the children's first erotic encounters with each other, while lazy figures sprawled across beds complain or simply

Lucrecia Martel, "La Cienaga," 2001, film still

hang around. Every formalistically composed scene, with lots of close-ups of (sweating) bodies, framed interiors, and expressive faces, is packed with criticism of the classism and racism of the (Argentinean) privileged class. This is expressed partly in harsh aggression and partly in their thoughtless banter.

The film begins with an almost surreal emphasis on sound. A distant roll of thunder from the approaching storm over a subtropical landscape evokes sultriness. A woman's hand pours light red wine into a glass and clinks its ice cubes: a sign of a new round of drinks. The camera then shows a group of lazy middle-aged figures in bathing suits lounging by a dirty pool. All of them have obviously drunk too much already and seem to be completely wasted. Next, we see and hear the limp bodies pulling their deck chairs across the paving stones as if seeking shelter from the approaching thunderstorm (but there is no canopy or other cover in sight). Children lie in bed; the daughter Momi (Sofia Bertolotto) is crying because her mother Mecha (Graciela Borges) accuses Momi's favorite indigenous domestic worker, Isabel (Andrea López), of stealing towels and wants to dismiss her for it.

Back at the pool, the drunk Mecha, iced red wine in hand, collects the remaining glasses for another round – and falls down. At first no one moves. No facial expression registers a reaction. From above, the camera frames a group of negligent adults seated in garden chairs, a pair of legs, as if on a dead body, lying on the ground in front of them. A dull, depressing, but also grotesque

scene that recalls early Almodóvar. The housemaid, Isabel, followed by Momi, rushes to help, lifting the blood-drenched woman. The daughter picks shards of glass from her mother's leathery décolleté, while the injured Mecha has already gathered enough to defend herself, in racist insults and defensive gestures, against Isabele's help. Momi, about eleven years old, drives the family's car in reverse into the garden so that her mother can be taken to the nearest hospital in La Ciénaga.

Interrupting this whole action, the camera cuts to the family's boys hunting in the subtropical forest, aiming a rifle at a buffalo stuck in the swamp.

This scratching, clinking, thundering, running, and scolding, coupled with pictorially strong choreography, demonstrated by the close-up of flabby white lower bodies pulling chairs behind them, captures a strange *tristesse* – a social stagnation, lifelessness, and brutality under the military dictatorship. Tension is created by the feeling of a constant threat, created by sounds and images that trigger expectations. Any roles of conservative, traditional family relationships are constantly broken, or rather, taken and discarded: children driving a car, hunting, or lounging by the pool, adults who don't care about anything and above all lie around, and a housemaid who tries to bring a chaotic house and its inhabitants into a presentable state, all the while being permanently insulted or used as an object of unfulfilled sexual desire (by Momi) without being in a position to defend herself.

Martel's film goes beyond merely representing female desires stifled by repressive patriarchal society. Her female figures are not infallible or naïve, nor are they victims. They can be simultaneously sensitive and authoritarian, or vulnerable and combative; they can be sympathetic, like the girls or the housemaid, or terribly tragicomic in their excessive frustration. What makes the film so worth seeing in 2020 is Martel's subtle multilayered narrative: never is only one thing taking place, and often the absurdity masks the everyday racism that, barely presented, is overheard by the others. And so Momi already adopts similar behaviors when she reacts sensitively to Isabel but also demands her love. Momi's interest in her maid does not signify a real understanding, because that would prompt real freedom for Isabel – a freedom without any advantages to exploit.