

Swamped in Sound

The Sound Image in Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga/The Swamp*

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Lucrecia Martel is a unique filmmaker. She always begins her projects by thinking first about the sound and then visually framing her story from that perspective. She is conscious of her soundtrack from the outset of her projects, as she has stated:

"From the very beginning, even when I'm writing, I think a lot about the sound. Many elements of my work in cinema come from oral storytelling and oral tradition. I think about sound and the rhythm of the sound. It makes it easier to shoot the scene, because you know exactly what you're supposed to hear, and whether there's some sound in the scene. When you have that clear, you don't need too much narrative material."¹

Her close attention to detail with the soundtrack creates an immersive environment that allows the viewer / listener to fully comprehend that sound world. However, this is not through point of view or point of audition. We are not allowed into the head of any of Martel's characters; instead we are kept at a distance. The soundscape is often non-naturalistic, it is inflated to hyper-real volume levels. It is this attention to the sound image that places the action at a remove.

By sound image, I am referring to the image created in the minds of the audience through these aural cues. Some visual information is given, but it is often fragmented. The soundtrack is used instead to fill out the space normally occupied by cinematography, set design, or what is traditionally referred to as the visual *mise-en-scène*. In Martel's films the sound image is often constructed in place of visual information. At other moments the soundtrack dominates the visual cinematic experience, drowning out the visual image through high volume sound effects and sound design. She places significant emphasis on environmental sound, with limited use of music. Through this attention to the soundtrack, the audience is stitched into the locale of her characters, and the sonic environment becomes palpable.

Martel's debut feature film *La ciénaga* (2001) tells the story of an extended family doing very little in the sweltering tropical heat of a Northern Argentinean summer. The adults drink chilled red wine whilst sunbathing around a filthy pool. The children are either lying around indoors or go unsupervised as they hunt with rifles. Accidents happen, both the adults and children are scarred from their injuries, but nobody takes responsibility or is proactive. There are class and race tensions prominent throughout the film. The mother, Mecha (Graciela Borges) is overtly racist, describing the indigenous maid, Isabel (Andrea López), as a thief, after some towels and sheets go missing, although we are given no evidence for this. The son, José (Juan Cruz Bordeu), who is having a relationship with his father's former mistress, tries to seduce Isabel, and is beaten up by her boyfriend. The daughter, Momi (Sofia Bertolotto), also has a secret crush on Isabel and becomes distraught when Isabel leaves due to an unplanned pregnancy.

The relationships are stifling, incestuous and void of motivation. A child dies tragically at the end of the film but it is his mother and father who appear to be the only responsible adults in the film. There is no reason given for what has happened and no solutions are offered. Martel, in an interview, stated:

"There is a lack of philosophy, a lack of goals, and a lack of ideology in the middle class. It is as if some new vision is missing, some trust in the possibility of changing the world through your own will."²

La ciénaga is a damning representation of middle class malaise in Argentinean society. Speaking of her hometown of Salta in Northern Argentina, Martel argues that,

"North Argentina is more Catholic and more influenced by Spanish colonizers... Social classes and ethnic conflicts are more pronounced. And in the north, psychoanalysis hasn't had the same impact as in the south. Sentences are longer in the north, more roundabout, abstruse – related to oral narratives."³

Her three feature films, *La ciénaga*, *La niña santa / The Holy Girl* (2004), and *La mujer sin cabeza / The Headless Woman* (2008) are heavily influenced by her "Northern Argentina upbringing, and share atmosphere, mood, language, familial culture and social class dichotomies, yet Martel understands her work as a "slow evolution, not an objective process." ⁴

Martel sees a significant divide between her northern home and the south, in particular, Buenos Aires, the capital where she studied and now works. In these three feature films she addresses various themes through her personal narratives and utilises the medium of sound to tell her stories. The result is an interesting tension between the aural and visual material, creating deeply complex films, and a unique cinematic experience.

La ciénaga was released during Argentina's economic collapse, in 2001. At this important political and economic moment, Latin American cinema emerged on the world stage, winning critics and audiences over with their narrative and aesthetic display. This marked a significant turning point. No longer was a Latin American film being considered in competition because it was a worthy topic or politically pertinent, but, rather stylistically, Latin American films were challenging the aesthetics of dominant cinematic practice.⁵ Other Latin American films such as *Amores perros*, (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2000), *Y tú mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles & Kátia Lund, 2002) were playing to international audiences, sometimes outside of the art house circuit. The legacy of third cinema or an imperfect cinema seemed to have been shaken off by this new wave of Latin American filmmakers.

Argentina was also enjoying an upsurge in film production and international distribution for its new wave of directors, who had recently emerged from the various film schools in Argentina. In 2001 there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of students taking film courses. It is estimated that between 4,000 and 10,000 students were studying film production in

Argentina.⁶ The notable films to emerge from Argentina at this point were *Pizza, birra, faso* / *Pizza, Beer and Cigarettes* (Adrián Caetano, 1998), *Nueve reinas* / *Nine Queens* (Fabián Bielinsky, 2000) and *La familia rodante* / *The Rolling Family* (Pablo Trapero, 2004). 2004 and 2005 have been the most prolific years in the history of Argentine cinema to date.

Many of these new young filmmakers looked to outside influences rather than to the previous national output from Argentina. They had their eyes set on international distribution and often attracted the attention of top ranking producers when their films were screened at foreign film festivals. *La niña santa* and *La mujer sin cabeza* were produced by Pedro Almodovar's company, El Deseo S.A. and *La niña santa* was distributed in the USA by HBO films and Fine Line Features.

There was a sense from this new wave of Argentine filmmakers that the past needed to be left to one side in order to get on with the business of filmmaking. However, it would be too reductive to imply that Latin American cinema and in turn, Argentine cinema, has turned its back on politically charged representations of their countries. Not all filmmakers were attempting to make first cinema outputs. Due to the scope of this article I will have to confine my argument to Martel's first feature film, but I do not want to suggest that she is either totally representative or unique within the broader New Argentine wave of filmmakers, but rather she is an interesting case study to consider. Her particular use of aural and visual imagery, necessitates a broader political reading of her films, as it challenges a visual bias in film practice and theory and requires the listener / viewer to attest that sound has meaning. B. Ruby Rich notes in her interview with Martel:

"Arguing that the Argentine middle class has yet to address its complicity during the years of dictatorship, [Martel] ruefully concluded that her generation had been raised with a distaste for politics. 'It's why we all avoid polemics and want to speak about that which is personal, local and even familial.'"⁷

But it is here, through the private and domestic sphere, and with an attention to detail in the soundtrack, that Martel is so successful in addressing the political. As Dominique Russell outlines:

"The surprising result of this sound awareness is an embodied intellectual experience. Her films emphasize the interpenetration of hearing, seeing, touch and smell. Focusing on feminine interiorities of desire and domesticity, they engage wider social issues of class and power. Martel's touch is light and observational rather than judgmental."⁸

It is this ability to represent broader political issues through personal narratives that make Martel's films such compelling viewing. It is mainly through her use of sound that Martel is able to create such an intimate portrayal of family life, and yet we are never encouraged to empathise with her characters.

Martel began making films and home movies as a child, and in 1986 moved to Buenos Aires to study Communications. She made a few short films while at University, among them *Rey Muerto / Dead King* (1995), which received several international awards. From 1995–98 she directed documentaries for television and programmes for children, which were widely acclaimed by the Argentine press. In 1999, she received the Sundance and NHK Filmmakers Award for the *La ciénaga* script.

Analysing the opening scene of *La ciénaga* and considering the decentred visual images presented, I will assess the impact of an aurally orientated filmmaker, actively making a film from a sound perspective. This will be done through a shot by shot analysis, outlining the pertinent sounds at each point of this opening sequence.

Figure 1: Opening shot of *La ciénaga*. Prior to this shot, the sound of wind in the trees can be heard over the opening credits and when the image cuts to the first shot we hear a louder sound of the wind, and some thunder rumbling in the distance.



Figure 2: Shot 2. The sound of thunder continues and then a sharp crack of thunder is dominant in the mix, accompanied by the sound of birds squawking. The image cuts to a credit title and the sound lowers marginally in volume over the credits.



Figure 3: Shot 3. Cut back to the visual images. The sound of rumbling continues in the distance, the cicadas are heavily present alongside the intermittent sound of birds. This type of atmospheric sound would normally be treated as a background sound but is instead foregrounded here. The sound of the wine poured and the bottle being placed down on the table is loud and dominant.

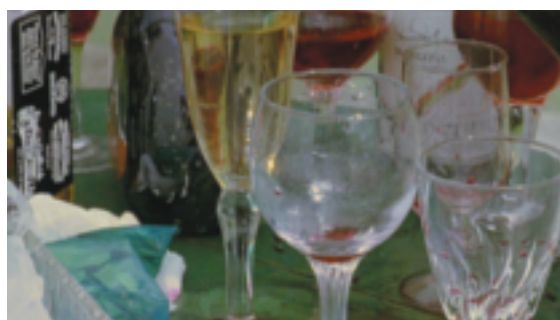




Figure 4: Continuation of Shot 3 The atmospheric sound from earlier continues coupled with the sound of picking up and dropping ice into a glass.



Figure 5: Continuation of Shot 3, tilt and pan on action. A continuation of the atmospheric sound and the pronounced rattling of ice in wine glass.



Figure 6: Continuation of Shot 3, pan on action. A continuation of the atmospheric sound heard earlier accompanied by the pronounced rattling of ice in wine glass. It is clear through the use of sound that the rattle heard, is meant to be heard, and is deliberately evoked by the mother, Mecha (Graciela Borges) to awaken those sitting and lying around the pool.

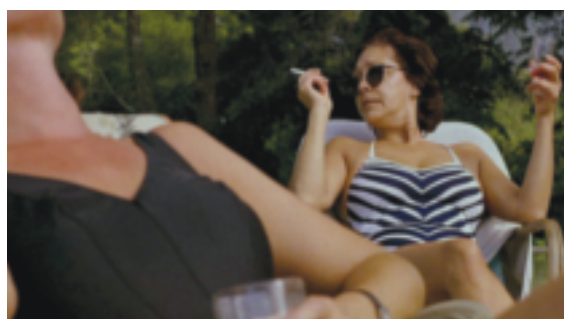


Figure 7: Shot 4. The sound accompanying this shot continues from the previous shot. There is no lowering in volume between shots, and it is this foregrounded rattling of ice that awakens the woman from her slumber. Although our visual attention is on the woman in the distant chair, our aural attention is on the rattling ice, which is out of frame but sonically foregrounded.

Figure 8: Shot 5. Continued atmospheric sound and rattling of ice in wine glass. This shot cuts to a credit title.



Figure 9: Shot 6. During the credit title the rattling of ice fades out and we hear the sound of dragging metal chairs on the patio. The volume of the chairs being dragged rises when we cut to shot 6.



Figure 10: Shot 7. The sound of chairs being dragged is played at an irritatingly loud level. The atmospheric sounds are placed in the background in relation to this sound.



Figure 11: Shot 8. The dragging sound continues, when the camera cuts the sound cuts to a different chair being dragged. The sound edit is jarring and furthers the irritating quality of the soundtrack at this point.





Figure 12: Shot 9. The sound continues from the previous shot. The image cuts to a credit title but the sound of dragging chairs continues over this. There is an atonal musical quality to the dragging at this point and it is almost as if the sound design contains a musicality in the film's soundtrack.

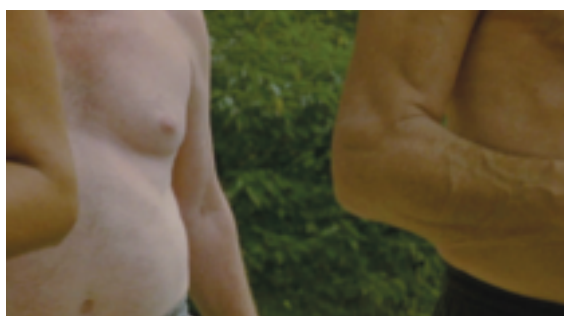


Figure 13: Shot 10. The dragging sound continues without the musical qualities.



Figure 14: Shot 11. The dragging sound continues...

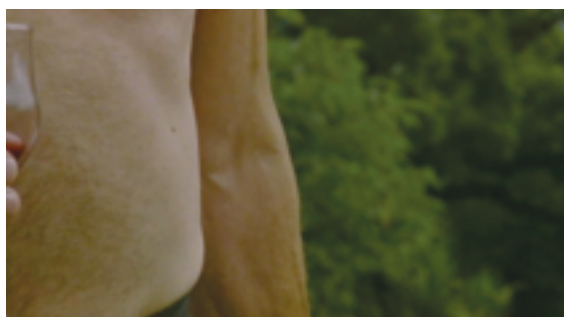


Figure 15: Shot 12. The dragging sound continues without the musical qualities. This shot cuts to the final credit title and the background sounds, specifically the rumble of thunder and the cicadas, which become more prominent in the mix again, alongside the returned musicality of dragging metal chairs.

Stills from Lucrecia Martel, *La ciénaga* / *The Swamp*, 2001,
courtesy of Lita Stantic Producciones

In this scene you can hear the sound of thunder, the rattling of ice and the dragging of chairs. What we see in many instances are images of partial framing, some wide-shots, mid-shots and close-ups, intercut with the screen credits. In the edit there are some instances of minor jump cuts that move the action on a fraction faster than they would play out in real time. This is barely perceptible but is perhaps used to create a subconscious jarring effect on the audience.

The use of close and partial framing allows the soundtrack to dominate the opening sequences, thus the soundscape dictates the filmic environment. This approach continues throughout the film and in Martel's subsequent films. The picture editing adheres to the invisibility of continuity editing but at other points in the opening scene jars slightly with jump cuts and ellipses. The soundtrack at these moments bridges the visual gap and sutures the audience back into the narrative. Thus, at times the picture and soundtrack support each other but at other moments are briefly at odds, to unsettle the viewer / listener.

The soundtrack in *La ciénaga* offers information that the visual image cannot. Some of the information comes in the form of atmospheric sounds or as the soundscape of the environment. The thunder rumbles, the birds squawk, the cicadas chirp, and a fly buzzes. Here we are placed firmly in the tropical space of Northern Argentina. The ice is rattled in the wine glass to get the attention of the sunbathers around the pool. The mother doesn't call out to the sunbathers to move. This is their collective ritual, repositioning their chairs around the filthy poolside. Dialogue would have been redundant here. Through the creative use of a sound effect, an aural shortcut alludes to a practice and lifestyle into which we are immediately immersed. The rattling ice is emblematic of the malaise in this middle class family and also foreshadows the lack of communication between the father and the mother. They cannot speak to each other and even in this opening scene the father does not respond to his wife's questions. Through the use of sound effects, a lot of information is quickly and concisely conveyed.

The sound volume of these chairs being dragged around the poolside is played at a hyper real level in order to sound both menacing and irritating. This is the most significant sound image created in the film. This audio, coupled with the visual swaying motion, conjures an audio-visual image of the living dead, or creatures from the swamp. These characters feel redundant and without function, and lack any specific responsibility within society. They are incapable of protecting themselves or their children and are content to be sedated with alcohol. The sound volume is important here, as it needs to dominate the soundscape, suggesting the self-absorption of these adults and their lack of regard for themselves or the others asleep in the house. They do not listen to themselves, each other, or their environment. They make noise but do not listen. They do not respond to the sound of the thunder. This is a tropical part of Northern Argentina and it is clear that they are used to these weather conditions, but there is no attempt made to look after the children and see that they are safe from harm.

The visual framing is often decentred with only partial elements of a character in shot. We often just see the back of a head, or in Martel's later film, *La niña santa*, many shots of ears, side profiles, and partial images are shown, with the key elements hidden from view. This technique creates a distance between subject and audience and does not allow for neutral observation or a voyeuristic perspective. In an interview with Chris Wisniewski (CW) in *Reverse Shot*, Lucrecia Martel (LM) was questioned about her choice of framing:

CW: Your framing is unconventional, but it feels very deliberate. Do you do a lot of planning before you shoot?

LM: This is precisely a consequence of thinking about sound first. When I get on set, I just need to find a good place to shoot most of the scene. I make the decision about where to put the camera and how to frame in the moment. I don't think about that in advance."⁹

In the opening scene of *La ciénaga* this fracturing technique is explored to create tension through the interplay of image and sound. Partial images of bodies are shown and we are up close to Martel's characters from the very outset. The opening two shots in the film are wide shots, but these do not act as master shots or as effective establishing shots, rather they provide a backdrop to the following action. It is in the editing of these images that the tension is built and we get a sense of foreboding from the beginning of the film. Martel achieves what Larry Rohter has described as "an ability to make the ordinary seem bizarrely unsettling."¹⁰

Sound has meaning, and can also convey political meaning. Sound can be the dominant aesthetic in a film, and sound image can create a filmic world. Martel consciously directs her films from how she wants them to sound and works her camera, actors and editing around this aesthetic choice. She achieves a broad political understanding of her characters and society through a close examination of the private sphere. She has put middle class Argentine society under scrutiny through her focus on the local, the peripheral and the domestic. Her films may not be entirely allegorical but there is significant reason to suggest that she is slipping in some of that political perspective through her choice of foregrounding the soundtrack. The image is not confined to the visual. Sound can equally be responsible for creating a sense of space, narrative and characterisation in film.

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 - 2 Lucretia Martel, Geoffrey Macnab, 'Bust and Boom: "It's not all bad news in Argentina. Two groups seem set to ride out the crash – footballers and filmmakers"', *Guardian*, 30 January 2002, 11-12.
 - 3 Lucretia Martel, Gail Spilsbury 'The Mystery of Lucretia Martel and *The Headless Woman*' in <http://www.sffs.org/content.aspx?catid=12,61&pageid=1304> (accessed 4 April 2011).
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Stephen M. Hart, *A companion to Latin American Film*, New York & Suffolk, Tamesis, 2004.
 - 6 Tamara L. Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film*, Wallflower Press, London, 2007.
 - 7 Ruby B. Rich, 'Making Argentina Matter Again', *New York Times*, 30 September 2001, 15, 20.
 - 8 Dominique Russell, 'Lucretia Martel – "a decidedly polyphonic cinema"', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 50, spring 2008 (accessed 4 April 2011).
 - 9 Lucretia Martel, Chris Wisniewski, 'When worlds collide', 2001.
 - 10 Larry Rohter, 'Floating Below Politics', *New York Times*, 1 May 2005, 16.