

Unsettling Assemblages: Anxiety and Materiality in *La Ciénaga* (Martel, 2001) and *Distancia de rescate* (Llosa, 2021)

This article explores the relationship between anxiety and the nonhuman in the films *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001) and *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021). The recognition of the material continuity between the characters and their environment is central to the production of negative affect in both diegesis. Anxiety is condensed in specific signifiers that produce a palpable tension between absence and excess, and in the configuration of milieus where overproximity among agents is unavoidable. In addition, the liminality of interiority and exteriority, the hybridization of the self and the vulnerability of the body to toxic substances contribute to this oppressive affective landscape. Anxiety, as a signal of danger, points towards foundational fears around the blurring of ontological boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The impossibility of isolation emerges in these films as an anxious trace in the form of cinematographic images, through characters that try to navigate a world in which dualism and human exceptionalism are being questioned.

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This article explores the configuration of anxiety in the films *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, Lucrecia Martel, 2001) and *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*, Claudia Llosa, 2021). I argue that anxiety is connected to the characters' relationships to their natural environments. The acknowledgement of the material continuity between the human and the nonhuman is key in producing the uneasy affective atmosphere present in both films. Through narrative and formal techniques that enmesh different agents and elements in oppressing milieus, these two films point towards an understanding of the subject as part of an ecological assemblage. In this context of ontological multiplicity, the overproximity of the other is at the core of anxiety. The consequences of toxic agrochemicals in *Distancia de rescate*, the role of animals and the liminality of the inside/outside dichotomy in *La Ciénaga*, plus the presence of hybrid characters in both films contribute to this landscape of negative affect.

La Ciénaga and *Distancia de Rescate* approach environmental space in ways that, at first glance, can seem to be in opposition. While in Martel's film there is a heightened separation between the artificial and claustrophobic inside, and the outside—a separation that will conclude in collapse, in *Distancia de rescate*, the invisible threat hidden in the natural space pervades everything. However, both films present the condition of being human as sharing blurred boundaries with the realm of the nonhuman. The affective approach of the films to the effects of the environment on the characters is not hopeful or positive. The use of genre conventions from horror cinema allows the filmmakers to portray ontological assemblages in

unsettling and unnerving ways. The recognition of the vulnerability of the human is a traumatic experience, and the blurring of the physical and conceptual limits between human and nonhuman does not result in a positive subjective experience nor in the sublimation of a terrifying nature. I argue in this essay that the affective layering of animals, water and toxins as disturbing forces in the narrative of the films is configured as a threat. The acknowledgement of the lack of separation is lived as suffocating and threatening, which speaks to the anxieties of the Cartesian self towards an embodied and vulnerable vital experience.

Worms in the body / Worms on the body

Distancia de rescate is a 2021 production by Peruvian filmmaker Claudia Llosa. She co-wrote the script with Samantha Schweblin, the writer of the novel (2015) from which the film is adapted. *Distancia de rescate* tells the story of a woman named Amanda (María Valverde), who arrives in the Argentinian countryside with her five year old daughter Nina (Guillermina Sorribes) on summer vacation. Amanda soon meets Carola (Dolores Fonzi), mother of David (Emilio Vodanovich), a shy and elusive boy who was poisoned by contaminated water when he was younger, as a result of the intensive agricultural activity of the area. In the first half of the film, Carola describes this traumatic episode. When she realized that David had been in contact with pesticide-polluted water, and in the absence of a rural doctor, she decided to take him to *La Casa Verde*, the home of an old spiritist. The healer performed a *migración* ("migration") on David, making his spirit leave his body—and with it, the poison—and securing his survival. Since that moment, David completely changed,

as his body began to host an unknown soul. For Carola, that night David was transformed into a monster.

Later on, Amanda and Nina both get intoxicated after ingesting contaminated water that had accidentally been spilled on the ground. This is the moment in time that frames the whole film. Amanda is being taken by David to *La Casa Verde*, where Carola attempts to subject Nina to a *migración* that would save her from dying—the same as she did for David. David speaks to Amanda with the goal of keeping her alive and of making her understand how she got sick. Thus, the repetitive and at times incoherent dialogue between a feverish Amanda and an aloof David structures the narrative of the movie. David wants Amanda to arrive at the *punto exacto*, the exact moment when Amanda and her daughter were poisoned. As a result, Amanda recalls all of the details of her trip to the town: her sensuous and conflicted relationship with Carola, her trust and mistrust of David, and her enactment of the *distancia de rescate*, the physical distance that separates her from Nina, and that will keep growing as the movie progresses. This notion, which gives the movie its title, refers to the maximum distance that might allow a parent to save their child in the case of an emergency.

Distancia de rescate starts with a quintessential horror scenario. A woman is being dragged along the ground. We don't know where she is, and neither does she. "They are like worms," she says. Immediately, we see a close-up shot of her ear, its curves producing a labyrinthine pattern that we still can't associate with a specific face. Then, a slug—a gray, viscous creature slithering through what seems like the bark of a tree. (Fig. 1). "Like worms, everywhere." But we soon find out that the woman is

not alone, as an infantile male voice begins to ask her questions. "Worms in the body?" he wonders. "Yes, in the body." The progressive succession of images lets us piece together the features of our female protagonist. Her mouth is half open, in a tentative invitation for the slug to slide in. Her eyelids slowly uncover what's beneath them, hardly overcoming the sweat and the water that soak them. Here, the senses are tied to their more primitive function: survival. But the woman's eyes can only register a blurry image of the trees above her. Amanda's disorientation and confusion is tangible, and the voiceover is her only guide in a tangle of incomprehensible stimuli. *Distancia de rescate* inaugurates its story with a proleptic glimpse into the appalling scenario of being dragged through the woods, a peak at one of the final moments of the diegesis. Setting the tone in terms of affect and genre, this scene helps establish the first extreme of the two-sided essence of nature in the film (benign, dangerous) and the centrality of anxiety to the overall story.

It's important to note that the worms that Amanda is feeling are not real worms. They act as a metaphor for the sensation that she is experiencing in her body after being poisoned. But the image of the slug on screen suggests something else: for Amanda, the toxins creep inside of her body as if they were alive. As Olivia Vázquez-Medina has explained, drawing on Fernando J. Rosenberg's thoughts (2019), "toxicity signals the permeability of bodies and consciousness, the continuity between human and nonhuman bodies, and the permeation of conceptual categories" (2021, 11). Critics have noted extensively how Samantha Schwebelin's novel shows the spreading of environmental degradation through the materiality of bodies, disregarding



Fig. 1: *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021)

“either the biophysical autonomy on which we base the principle of identity, or the separation between nature and society on which the economic and political theories of modernity are based” (Vázquez-Medina 2021, 11). The pervasive nature of the toxins indicates “the continuity of the material world,” where “human and nonhuman actants connect, interact, and hybridize” (Pérez 2019, 156). At first sight, the image of the slug in the film points towards a certain material sameness that allows physical and conceptual contact between the different elements in the scene. Thus, in this inaugural moment one of the main philosophical points of the film is established: the boundaries of the human are primarily theoretical. They respond to a misidentification with an ideal image of autonomy that prevents us from recognizing our existence in a continuum with other entities which determine and constitute us.

However, this contact between agents is profoundly antagonistic. The inclusion of the image of the slug in the opening scene, considering that its value is intended to be metaphorical, is employed in a way that heightens a feeling of uneasiness and horror. What the mollusk suggests is both the possibility of worms inside of the body—underlined by Amanda’s open mouth—and of worms outside of the body, crawling on Amanda’s skin while she is being dragged through the forest. The two prospects are daunting, and mirror the invasive character of the nonhuman that will drive the narrative of the film, and that is primarily enacted by the threat of contaminated water. Neither of these two prospects are real, or end up taking place. The image of the animal is a signifier whose polyvalence signals an immediate and unbearable danger—worms in the body, worms on the body—that is never condensed in

that specific referent. The real danger, the one that is threatening Amanda’s life, has a different cause. But the metaphor, crucial in our attempts to describe what happens to our bodies, opens up a distinctive visual realm enacted by an explicit choice on the side of the filmmaker. The visual metaphor has a radical power of interruption, its affect literally cuts the narrative. In this case, it is a surplus, but it is also an absence. In the novel by Samantha Schweblin, the word “worm” is uttered in Amanda and David’s speech, as it is in Llosa’s film through the voices of actors María Valverde and Emilio Vodanovich. However, Llosa also decides to include the visual excess of a crawling creature, adding a remainder of meaning that requires interpretation. The image of the mollusk, its inaugural and polysemic nature, points towards the root of the anxiety that pervades *Distancia de rescate*.

In the words of Joan Copjec, “anxiety is a signal of danger” (1991, 26). What makes anxiety so particular is that it has no signifiers, it doesn’t have a locatable object, unlike fear or grief. Anxiety is thus considered an affect, indubitable because of its non-semiotic corporeal nature. Eugenie Brinkema (2014) explains how for Kierkegaard and Lacan, “anxiety has something to do with the nothing” (183). She notes that “anxiety has something to do with the not-yet, and, as such, the nothingness of the future that always has not taken place, but that might, in its not-yet-having-happened dimension, take place” (184). Overall, anxiety is “the possibility of possibility” (184). Renata Salecl (2004), writing about war, claims that “it appears that it is the very void, nothingness, that makes us anxious [...] And in order to deal with this void, the soldier is hoping to actually find an object he might be afraid

of” (10). Anxiety is a non-presence that latches onto a third object. The image of the slug is the first instance in *Distancia de rescate* that points towards a sort of nothingness, due to its metaphorical and figurative character, and towards the horror of a possibility that is invisible but that has material consequences. It relates both to the lack of object that Sigmund Freud connects to anxiety, and to the “lack of lack” (Copjec 1991, 27), the overproximity of the non-object theorized by Jacques Lacan. The visual nature of the slug embodies this ambivalence because it imposes an excess and an absence, since neither Amanda nor David are actually seeing it, it is introduced in the narrative composition as an external figure that connects to corporeal processes. These frameworks on anxiety shed light on how the figures of the slug and the worm refract the contact between Amanda and the toxins, signaling an externalization of affect, its formal configuration in the tissue of the image and the soundscape.

Narrative anxiety

After this unsettling first scene, the film introduces us to the narrative recollection of the facts. The feverish dialogue between Amanda and David frames the narrative, as Amanda guides us through her story. David repeatedly asks Amanda to focus on the details of her own plot, to look closely and to pay attention to what is important. In other words, David demands a reinterpretation of the image. This provokes an interrogative attitude in the viewer, a tense disposition towards that which is being shown. Everything that we can see might hide the key to Amanda’s deadly situation, so nothing should be taken for granted. The encouragement of an inquisitive mode of spectatorship highlights the

invisibility of the threats that are part of the diegetic world. Such invisibility is a direct cause of anxiety on the side of the spectator, but also on the side of the characters. For Anne McConnell, in the novel anxiety stems “from the difficulty of identifying specific risks and consequences of toxic practices, and, at the same time, from the understanding and fear that poisonous chemicals can seep into any space, putting everyone at risk” (2023, 17). Claudia Llosa and Samantha Schweblin transfer this affective structure to the film through a script that asks us to relentlessly search for something in an image that plays with our expectations. The material, invisible threat that the film primarily revolves around is polluted water, contaminated by the pesticides used in the fields that encircle the town. This is what David is apparently asking Amanda to look for, the moment when the toxic liquid and the human body first made contact, the *punto exacto*. But in this film water is everywhere, and the poison is impossible to discern.

Amanda recalls the first time that she met Carola. A general shot in which she is seen slowly advancing towards the camera anticipates her role as both a disturbing figure and as an object of desire. Amanda’s gaze is materialized in a shot that combines both her look and the figure of Carola approaching her. We can see her carrying two large buckets of water. Carola gives a very succinct explanation: “I brought you water. Sometimes you can’t drink from the tap.” The pervasiveness of polluted water is still not part of the story, so neither Amanda nor the viewer can understand the danger that threatens the livelihoods of the people from the town, but the film is urging us to look for it in every detail. David’s instructions are vague, and push us to expect the worst from every situation,

infusing the film with a “possibility of possibility” that is infinite.

Another example of visual uncertainty takes place later in the film. After an unsettling scene in which Amanda runs into David at night, the image suddenly cuts to a completely different visual realm: the next morning, a caterpillar crawls on a wheat ear (Fig. 2). We can hear David, who insists that “We are looking for worms. Something very similar to worms.” A close-up of Nina in the fields with her face covered by wheat ears follows the insect (Fig. 3). Amanda is seen casually walking through the crops, playing hide and seek with her daughter. Suddenly, we hear a loud noise and a scream. A gun to deter birds has gone off, creating a jump scare that makes us reevaluate if we are now facing that moment that the film is pushing us towards. This is not the *punto exacto*, but later on a flashback will show that the liquid on the crops that seemed to be dew, was actually pesticides. The organization of the scene, in which an idyllic landscape where mother and daughter play in nature is interrupted by a very loud and unsettling noise, highlights the feeling of uneasiness that contributes to the anxious mode of the overall film. Anxiety, as I have already explained, condenses in non-objects (slug, caterpillar), since they point towards that which is not visible nor present, a “nothingness.” They create an affective structure that pervades the image through its excessive absence. In this scene, David defines the *punto exacto* as the moment when the worms touch your body for the first time. It is the instance in which the human and the nonhuman come into physical and irreversible contact, signaling that the human can’t not be part of an ecological assemblage, of a multiplicity of connected beings, of a network where interrelation is

“all there is” (Law 1992, 2). In this sense, *Distancia de rescate* is an example of “ecosickness fiction” (Campisi 2020, 176), a narrative that highlights conflict not only in the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, but also on a sociopolitical level. The film enacts a clash between the agroindustrial system and the rural communities that are vulnerable to its effects.

Gisela Heffes (2019) has called the representation of nature in Schweblin’s novel “post-natural,” since the rural space is portrayed as claustrophobic, as a site of horror and environmental degradation. *Distancia de rescate* shows this idea cinematically by cultivating a radical ambivalence in its portrayal of natural spaces. The scene that opens the film already offers us a vision of a negative and menacing nature: the forest closes in on Amanda, reflecting on her terrified eyes and contributing to her disorientation. An extreme close-up of Amanda’s eye unceasingly moving from side to side embodies her own optical uncertainty, her inability to decipher an opaque landscape. The general shots of the fields when Amanda and Nina move by car show an almost barren scene, an apocalyptic view where the dark clouds preside over a colorless organization of the land. However, the goal of their trip is to enjoy nature. The film presents us with several scenes in which the characters are harmoniously immersed in a green and sylvan environment. These moments are dominated by desire, by the constellation of erotic gazes that is established between Carola and Amanda. Such a vacillating portrayal of nature, in-between harmony and danger, contributes to the epistemological precariousness that dominates the film. Pablo Virguetti connects this affective choice, which also takes place in the novel, with



Fig. 1: *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021).



Fig. 2: *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021).

our environmental crisis: “The real is only an economy of possible hidden dimensions, which establishes a paranoid relationship between the individual and his environment. At this point in our reflection, it is easy to imagine that this figure can adequately represent ecological problems: the paradox between, on the one hand, believing that we see a harmonious environment and a nature and, on the other hand, discovering the different types of invisible pollution” (2023).¹ It must also be noted that by the end, the film has given us enough clues of the pervasive presence of pesticides in the landscape: we can see a man spilling toxic chemicals on the ground, workers on the fields and a crop spraying plane. *Distancia de rescate* draws an arch that takes us from ignorance to revelation through its insistence on underscoring silences, elements on the background and the insufficiency of our interpretative frameworks.

Monstrosity and animalization

Óscar A. Pérez (2019) has noted the hybridization of the human and the nonhuman in the novel by Samantha Schweblin. Bodies have the ability to affect and to be affected; this is the premise of relation in a milieu where boundaries are transgressed and individuation always implies a dialogic connection with the environment. Material openness and continuity pave the way for an organic hybridization that challenges conceptual categorizations and fantasies of autonomy. Hybridization is a symptom of “the shared physicality not only of humans and animals, but also of animate creatures and inanimate matter” (Desblache 2012, 245). In the film, such liminality is pervaded by negative affect. The character of David epitomizes this process of hybridization most acutely, since he bears an unknown soul.

David’s survival to the ingestion of pesticides transforms him into a monster, according to his own mother. As explained by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, monsters are disturbing because of their fundamental hybridity, which prevents them from being included in any systematic categorization. In his words, “a mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration” ([1996] 2020, 40). This threatening collapse of conceptual dichotomies that is embedded in the figure of the monster is instrumentalized in the anxious atmosphere of the film. The monstrosity of David constitutes a question mark, since the film only gives answers about his role in Amanda’s fate in the very last moment.

David’s hybridization is also an animalization. David’s monstrosity is produced, in part, through his proximity to the animal world, something that also heightens his apparent unknowability. David is, at first glance, another part of reality that must be closely scrutinized in the experience of watching the film. The first time that Amanda sees David, he is laying down on a rusty boat in a swampy river. He looks up to stare at Amanda, his body contorted like he is about to attack her (Fig. 4). Later on, Carola explains how she caught David killing and burying two ducks when he was only a child. In the film, this event is portrayed through abrupt handheld camera movements that show David as a young child grabbing the necks of the ducks, dragging them through the mud and making a hole in the ground. The distance from the camera to its subject is unstable, mirroring the opacity of the character



Fig. 3: *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021).

and suggesting an apprehension that will be later resolved. Throughout the film, David appears lurking around and silently observing the couple of friends. He hides in the forest and is always seen outdoors. Apparently, the migration has robbed him of his ability to integrate in the rural community, since he spends all of his time alone. This constitutes the film's critique of humanism: David is surprisingly the only character to help Amanda find Nina once they get sick. He carefully carries her on a boat to *La Casa Verde*, asking her questions in order to keep her alive. In addition, David advises the newcomers to leave Carola's house when she offers to take care of them, in the first stages of the sickness. By the end of the film, it's clear that he cares about Amanda and Nina's wellbeing. In his dialogue with Amanda, David clarifies that he didn't actually kill the ducks, he found them dead in the river and decided to bury them. This confirms that David's becoming-monster, his hybridization, opened him to a form of care and respect towards the nonhuman that is alien to the other characters of the film. In short, one of the most important resolutions of the film is the affective shift that the character of David is subjected to. He is first a source of disquietude, but is then portrayed as a generous and innocent child. The film problematizes the idea of "humanity" as an enclosed, exceptional moral compass through David's presence as a polyvalent signifier that is difficult to pin down. Amanda trusts him from the very beginning, because she sees him as a misunderstood child. However, after David breaks into Amanda's house twice, she buys into Carola's theories about David's monstrosity. The instability of David in the dichotomy of safety and danger makes him a perfect non-object for

the affect of anxiety, coupled with the inquisitive mode that surrounds the character. The animalization that comes with his hybridity is a result of the material continuation of the human and the nonhuman in the film. My argument is that this continuity is necessarily met with anxiety: it is rooted in antagonism for it threatens the fantasy of autonomy of the Cartesian subject. Moreover, the film problematizes its own call to scrutiny, it makes viewers face their own judgement towards the figure of David, whose initial unknowability might just be an effect of Carola's views.

Sigmund Freud, in his book *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* ([1926] 1959), describes two forms of symptom formation related to anxiety. The first one has to do with repetition: the anxious subject attempts to repair what has been done by trying to undo it. "When anything has not happened in the desired way it is undone by being repeated in a different way; and thereupon all the motives that exist for lingering over such repetitions come into play as well" (120). Repetition is enacted in *Distancia de rescate* in the obsessive dialogue between Amanda and David, in the repetition of words and phrases, and in the visualization of memories. The revision of the facts is directed at changing their outcome, but there is no space for optimism in this narrative. The second symptom has to do with isolation. In order for the subject to avoid anxiety, they try to isolate a specific moment so that it is "not reproduced in the ordinary process of thought" (120). For Eugenie Brinkema, Freud's theory of anxiety signals that "what is desired is the possibility of interpolating an interval into which the nothing is placed to ward off further happenings—anxiety derives from the failure or inability to interrupt a system [...] movement's horror is that it cannot be punctuated, that the plenitude of an extirpated interval from time is ultimately

impossible” (2014, 196). Anxiety arises when there is a risk of overproximity, when neither interruption nor distance can take place. The atmosphere that is portrayed in *Distancia de rescate*, where characters are vulnerable and permeable to their immediate surroundings through the invisibility of poison, and where the idea of humanity as a separate entity is challenged by an animalized, liminal and hybrid figure, ends up constructing an asphyxiating closeness that challenges the presence of clear boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Such closeness is not received with joy or hope because it constitutes a form of antagonism, its narrative resolution ultimately being death. The conceptual and material opening up of the human to the idea of its continuity is traumatic. The constitution of David as the quintessential monster in the scheme of the horror film, a creature that is unique in its hybridity, stands for “the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror” ([1986] 2002, 28), as Robin Wood has explained in his work on the genre. It is the unknown element in David, his compound soul, the trace of material vulnerability that exists within, what in the film determines his monstrosity and his animalization, elements that are ultimately reinscribed and narratively reversed. In the words of Lucile Desblache, “The Other, biologically and socially, is no longer defined in opposition to the self but as part of a self that is constantly evolving” (2012, 245). His pendular illegibility in the moral spectrum of the film signals a broader inability to cope with our relation to the milieu in the face of environmental degradation.

Sounding negative affect

La Ciénaga tells the story of two related families in Salta, Argentina. One is a formerly wealthy family of

rural farmers that produce and sell peppers, and the other is middle class and lives in an apartment in the city. Mecha (Graciela Borges), the head of the wealthier family, suffers an accident by the pool. Tali (Mercedes Morán) reconnects with her in the hospital, where she has taken her youngest son Luchi (Sebastián Montagna) to see the doctor. Later on, Tali and her family visit Mecha in her summer residence, *La Mandrágora*, away from the city. The film portrays the weariness of the lives of the characters and the small brawls that take place among them, and that are ultimately inconsequential. *La Ciénaga* is a film where, at first glance, events follow one another monotonously. We can see characters wander around and lie on their beds all day, with a drowsy and a decadent predisposition towards life that alludes to the moral corrosion of the national upper-middle class. Gerd Gemünden (2019) notes that the film has been said to portray “the decline of the provincial bourgeoisie, which in turn is a stand-in for a stagnant and paralyzed society” (35). According to this reading, “the dysfunctional middle-class family and its dilapidated country estate become an image of a societal pillar beyond repair” (35). Natural elements and nonhuman animals are portrayed in ways that heighten such social critique. However, in this essay I explore how their representation relates to anxiety and negative affect.

Similarly to *Distancia de rescate*, from the beginning *La Ciénaga* introduces us in an atmosphere of tension and oppression created through formal and stylistic choices. Aaron Smuts (2008) explains how the film constantly presents warning signs of Luchi’s imminent death. In the end of the film, the child dies when he is peeking at his neighbor’s house and falls off a ladder. He was trying to find out the source of the barks that had

been scaring him for a while, since his cousin Vero told him the story about an African rat that was mistaken for a dog. Malena Verardi (2013) comments that there are multiple moments in which Martel alludes to the tragic fate of this character: through shot composition when his cousin Joaquín (Diego Baenas) points his gun at a dead cow in a swamp and Luchi stands in the middle, through his proleptic death performance while playing with his sister, or when the child is directly associated with the *perro-rata*/African rat, who also dies at the end of his cousin Vero's story. These elements contribute to creating an environment of invisible threats that accumulates and is released at the end of the diegesis. In addition, Martel's paradigmatic use of off-camera space builds up a feeling of "strangeness" that permeates the film, and as explained by Julia Kratje, this is a "key aspect of the composition of the *mise-en-scène*, which besieges, disturbs, smothers and jolts both characters and viewers" (Barrenha, Kratje and Merchant 2022, 195).

In this sense, sound has also been connected to the palpable tension of the film. As Dominique Russell (2008) explains, even if the characters are lying around, we don't feel like we can relax with them, since sound produces an "underlying tension" that keeps us "off-kilter." The amplification of disturbing sounds from nature or from specific objects over human voices, and the presence of an empathetic sound contributes to a heightened sense of disquietude. In the words of Fiona Clancy, "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" (2015, 2). In addition, Andrea Avidad (2020) has noted the importance of acousmatic sound for the ontological destabilization of animals in the film.

Overall, the sonic rendering of the nonhuman is one of the ways in which anxiety is structured in *La Ciénaga*. As claimed by both Russell and Clancy, there are a myriad of moments where natural sounds overpower human voices, such as the scenes in the woods, where the sounds of insects and birds drown out the image, or the sequence at the dam, in which the sound of the water continues in proximity even after the camera has moved away. These natural sounds have the capacity of constructing an uncanny effect that we can relate to anxiety, and that points towards the unease produced by the overproximity of the human and the nonhuman. In other words, the anxiety provoked by such a lack of distance constructs the sense of strangeness that is required by the diegesis. The first time that Tali's house is presented, we hear the barks from the neighbor's dog. They prevent Tali from speaking on the phone, and they immediately catch the attention of Luchi. The barks interrupt the scene and introduce a foreign element in it. Here, the feeling of oppression and claustrophobia is constructed sonically, through the combination of the loud barks and the screams of the children. These barks will play an increasingly important role in the narrative, developing into an anxious trigger after the story of the African rat is introduced.

Pools and imaginary creatures

The pool at *La Mandrágora* is a crucial element for the study of the configuration of anxiety in *La Ciénaga*. During the first visit of Tali's family to her cousin's summer residence, the children of both families gather at the pool, where they play with the dogs and with several inflatable toys. The pool at the house is filthy, the water is dark green and it is overflowing with dead leaves. Momi, running away from her brother José (Juan Cruz Bordeu),

suddenly jumps in it. The children stare at the surface of the water in a general shot, waiting for Momi to emerge (Fig. 5). This shot lasts more than ten seconds, building up tension through a minimalistic soundtrack of almost imperceptible water sounds. The image cuts to a close-up of the dark, cloudy water, which makes the bottom of the pool impossible to discern (Fig. 6). There is no punctuation in the sound design, the delicate water burbling can now be ascribed to the small bubbles in the image. We are then abruptly shown a shot of Vero (Leonora Balcarce), who starts telling the story of the African rat. Momi is seen again with the group, casually listening to her sister recounting the tale.

This crucial ellipsis presents the pool as a latent space that, while superficially reflecting the deterioration of the material wealth of the family, condenses anxiety towards a form of otherness that is epitomized by a lack of intervention of the human. The pool is a space of organic degradation where the laws of nature are self-contained. It is an eminently abject locus because of the presence of filth, of the result of natural processes that should be kept out of sight. In spite of this, Momi jumps in. The connection of pools and desire in Martel's cinema has been related to the infectiousness and fluidity of water (Mayer 2014, 196), which also heightens the feeling of abjection, of the refusal of those disturbing elements of the self that are exteriorized. Momi is clearly affected by her own desire towards Isabel (Andrea López), the maid at the house, but her immersion also signals the evident ambivalence of anxiety that will be thoroughly explored in the character of Luchi. The pool attracts and repels because it is unknowable and opaque, but still ever present and physically unavoidable. In *La Ciénaga* water hides and covers, it produces anxiety due to its unknowability and

its radical difference, while it signals a potential for infectious connection. Dirty water is the substrate in which characters float, since it is always in the background. Lucrecia Martel (2009a) has explained that for her “there are a lot of similarities in perception between being in the pool and being in the world.” Being in the world of the film means being surrounded by an asphyxiating closeness, that of the otherness of the self, of an unbearable continuity with the material processes of filth that exist in the water. The muck is threatening and nasty. Isabel warns Momi: “You’ll catch something.” While Momi jumps in, the other characters stay at the edge, avoiding the dirt. Boundaries are enforced and transgressed in a constant spatial back and forth that constitutes the structure of anxiety as a “difficult movement of form” (Brinkema 2014, 209), as a suffocating repetition.

The affective weight of the pool in *La Ciénaga* has been alluded to by Ana Amado, who talks about a “clash between the speed of children’s movements and the sluggishness of matter” (25), which is visibly won by the latter. For her, children in the film enact an “energy without direction,” since they constantly cross opposing spaces—interior and exterior, rural and urban—and connect them in an ecosystem of desire and violence. Such ecstatic drive is contrasted by “inertia,” by the pervasive power of matter. “Matter lumps together, like the fermented pool water, and obstructs itself in a pure accumulation of debris. And in that accumulation of materialities [...], something emerges which is like the prehistory of a culture, as if every person was, in his or her way, the trace or the remnant of that past” (25). Amado refers to a psychological, generational past, to the transmission of information about “bonds and betrayals” (25) that are then repurposed by the children in their own horror tales. Thus, the filthy pool appears



Fig. 5: *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001).



Fig. 6: *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001).

as an index of accumulated time. Such time is historical and generational, but also biological and organic. The milieu of dirt stresses the interconnection of trauma and nonhuman agency, of the muddiness of water and the inscrutability of desire. Instead of Momi, what emerges from the pool after the close-up of the water is a mythical figure that will fold the dichotomy of otherness and sameness onto itself.

At the pool, Vero tells the tale of the African rat. A woman found a dog on the street and took it home with her cats. The next morning, she realized that the dog was covered in blood and the cats were nowhere to be found. She grabbed the dog, bathed it, and took it to the vet. The vet cut the dog in two with an ax, and realized that it had two rows of teeth. The vet told the woman: “It’s not a dog, Madam, it’s an African rat.” Avidad (2020) has explained how this scene is constructed in order to put “the listener-viewer in a position of uncertainty in regard to what seems to be and what actually is” (228), since it is a story about deception and uncertainty. In addition, the way in which Vero is shown telling the tale produces a form of acousmatic sound. An inflated toy covers her mouth while she speaks, hiding the source of the voice and enhancing the “uneasiness” (228) of the scene. As Vero recounts the story, several shots of the children are shown. While she explains that the woman bathed the dog before taking it to the vet, the image cuts to Luchi. His sister Agustina (Noelia Bravo Herrera) is washing Luchi’s hair with a hose while he attentively listens to his cousin speak. This is the first instance in which Luchi is visually equated to the African rat. The tale makes a profound impact on him: later on, he brings it up several times to his parents (“Is it true that African rats exist?”), and starts to associate this figure to the barks of his neighbor’s dog. Back home, his sister Mariana (María Micol Ellero) and her

friend contribute to Luchi’s fear when they look over the wall and scream “It’s a *perro-rata!*”, introducing a new absent figure to the diegesis. The *perro-rata* is the liminal entity that condenses the epistemological uncertainty conveyed in Vero’s tale and in the acousmatic barks of the dogs behind the wall. In other words, the *perro-rata* is not the dog behind the wall, nor the African rat in the story, it is a hybrid that emerges in a space of not-knowing. Luchi’s fear of the creature that barks behind the wall in the backyard is superimposed with the idea that Luchi might also be an African rat or a *perro-rata* (Smuts 2008, 288; O’Brien 2017, 471). The fact that he is growing an extra tooth establishes a connection between him and these absent, imaginary creatures. Tali and her partner are shown multiple times examining Luchi’s mouth, mimicking the vet in the story told by Vero. In addition, Luchi himself seems to grasp this identification, since he worriedly mentions that there are many teeth coming out of his mouth. In the end, Luchi is also an object of the epistemological uncertainty of the mythical creature, this time reflected upon the self.

Sarah O’Brien (2017) has identified a similar relationship between the human and the nonhuman in *La Ciénaga* to that which we saw in the case of *Distancia de rescate*. In her opinion, Luchi shows a remarkable “curiosity” (467) towards animals. In the first scene at Tali’s house, her older son brings a dead hare to the kitchen, which lays on its side on the counter with some blood still present on its snout. The hare is only shown tangentially, and Luchi, whose leg is bleeding too, approaches the hare and starts blowing on its face, while he is holding a toy gun. In the woods, Luchi seems to be inspecting the carcass of the cow in the swamp, blocking his cousin’s attempts to shoot it. For O’Brien’s, Luchi’s

vulnerability and curiosity towards animals “evinces a generational shift in the strict divisions between human and animal” (474). Regarding the *perro-rata*, the film connects him to it at the same time as he projects the creature on the dogs whose barks constantly invade the soundscape of his house. O’Brien reads Luchi’s extra tooth as “an atavistic remainder, a remnant of a primordial mammalian past,” proving a “distinct mutability” through his “barely perceptible openness to animals and the alterity they embody” (474).

Similarly to *Distancia de rescate*, for Luchi the threat of radical otherness comes from outside: the barks that in their lack of visual origin produce difference and threaten the category of the animal (Avidad 2020) exist as empty signifiers, as sounds of ontological potentiality that produce unrest. However, that same otherness also exists inside, in the extra tooth that Luchi is growing, in the possibility that he might also be an African rat. Avidad has read the figure of the *perro-rata* as an animal hybrid, and in that hybridity and its possibility to “disturb self-contained identities” the figure of the *perro-rata* makes Luchi anxious. However, I believe that hybridity is most openly condensed in the character of Luchi himself, since the allusions to his unstable identity and material constitution present him as another hybrid figure. Hybridity is not just threatening because it exists outside in the world, but because it resounds back inside. In other words, the hybrid produces anxiety because it confirms that I might be other *to myself*. This otherness is eminently nonhuman in both films, and here I depart from my psychoanalytic reading: the nonhuman is not just symbolic, it literally threatens the conceptual and identitarian boundaries of the human through its interior/exterior ambivalence. Because anxiety is without an object, it is related

to the “nothing,” it must be alluded to by non-objects, by objects that present both an absence and an excess. The African rat and the *perro-rata* act parallel to the worm in *Distancia de rescate*: they don’t exist, but their uncertainty is nonetheless felt and has consequences in the diegesis. In the film, the extra tooth that Luchi is growing speaks of the material continuity of the human and the nonhuman, of the trace of nonhuman otherness that threatens human exceptionalism and conceptual isolation. By connecting it to the African rat, *La Ciénaga* presents the tooth as the material imprint that connects Luchi to the nonhuman animal, as the unavoidable presence of otherness in the self.

In a later scene, Luchi and his parents go to the dentist to examine his extra tooth. The family is sitting at a table in the waiting room, and the noise from construction work taking place within the hospital renders their voices almost inaudible. Luchi’s father grabs the X-ray of his son’s mouth, and a close-up displays it in full detail (Fig. 7). The X-ray depicts the dental crowding in the child’s mouth, a revelatory image reflecting, once again, the moment in the story of the African rat in which the vet and the lady realize that the dog actually has two rows of teeth. The X-ray constitutes a representation of what happens in the body, a technologically mediated approach to the imprint of the nonhuman that exists in Luchi. It offers a look inside that confirms the hybrid character of the child, which differs from that of David in *Distancia de rescate* because Luchi does not contain an ounce of narrative antagonism. Without altering the viewer’s perception of him as essentially non-hostile, Luchi contorts his mouth several times making an expression akin to that of a monster or beast (Fig. 8). The interrogation of the hybrid nature of the character, of his internal, latent non-humanity,



Fig. 7: *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001).

is epitomized through an indexical visual revelation taking place in an anxious setting of sonic disturbance.

Conclusion

The importance of the nonhuman in the narrative development of *Distancia de rescate* and *La Ciénaga* is what primarily led me to carry out a comparative reading of both films. Despite the fact that *La Ciénaga* is not concerned with depicting a specific context of ecological crisis, human-animal relations are central to its diegesis. My argument about the anxiety caused by the realization of the material and conceptual continuity of the human and the nonhuman, the negative affect that arises when the category of the human is threatened, takes place in both films in surprisingly similar ways. At a formal and structural level, both films build a sense of tension and suspense that permeates the diegesis. In addition, repetition as an anxious gesture in the narrative is not exclusive to *Distancia de rescate*, since *La Ciénaga* is also composed of a repetition of spaces and visual motives, which contributes to its claustrophobic structure.

I have explained how the figure of the child is central to both films. In *La Ciénaga* and *Distancia de rescate* the progression of the plot is determined by two hybrid children: David, who suffered from pesticide poisoning and was subjected to a *migración* that stripped him of his soul, and Luchi, who is growing an extra tooth which connects him to two imaginary creatures, the African rat and the *perro-rata*. The hybridity of both characters points towards an anxiety that is portrayed in different ways. In the case of David, he himself acts as a non-object of anxiety, in his polyvalence and his difficulty of being read throughout the diegesis. In the case of Luchi, the anxiety is experienced by the character himself: the latent uncertainty in the

story of the African rat is externalized in the barking behind the wall, but it also exists with regards to the child's own sense of self. These two different procedures place David and Luchi as redoubts of anxiety, as hybrid creatures that transgress fixed categories and dichotomies related to the definition of the human in an environment that precedes, shapes and intervenes, in a milieu that prevents isolation.

Another element open to comparative reading is water. In both films, water affects the characters and the development of the diegesis, beyond its role as a symbol. In *La Ciénaga* the pool exists as a latency that signifies as a space for organic decomposition and as a mirror of the decadence of the family. The shot of the leaves floating in the green water, after Momi's immersion, has a parallel in *Distancia de rescate*: when David gets infected, we see a shot of a puddle (Fig. 9) in whose surface Carola and David are reflected. The water of the puddle is dirty, making its reflection cloudy and unclear. This shot interrupts Carola's narration of the event, since it introduces a perspective that is not her own and alludes to a knowledge that exceeds that of the characters and of the viewer. Water is here an element of intrigue and doubt, it points towards an unknown threat that resides in its stagnant lack of movement. When David watches Amanda from his boat, the water is also swampy, mirroring the views of water in *La Ciénaga*: the filthy pool and the swamp in the woods where a cow gets stuck. Vázquez-Medina explains how water suggests "the difficulty of establishing pure, enclosed, and autonomous entities" (2021, 13). This ability of water to connect is complemented by the threat of its accumulation and the opacity with which it is presented. On the other hand, water is associated with desire. As Martel has explained,



Fig. 8: *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001).



Fig. 9: *Distancia de rescate* (Claudia Llosa, 2021).

“there are places that are dangerous for some animals, but they are also places full of life” (2009b). I have already noted how Momi immerses herself in her own desire when she jumps in the pool. In *Distancia de rescate*, the scenes in which Amanda and Carola are in the pool or in the river display the configuration of desire between them. In these moments, Amanda’s desiring gaze determines the fragmentary shots of Carola’s body. Water is thus an allusion to contact, to the contiguity of desire and the lack of conceptual and physical boundaries, but also to suffocation, opacity and the “possibility of possibility” that pervades its lack of movement. This possibility, revealed by the technology of cinema, is ultimately the material fate shared by humans and nonhumans.

Finally, the idea that overproximity is related to anxiety forces us to consider the ethical framework that underwrites these two films. In the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, anxiety stems from intersubjectivity, from an encounter with the Other. For Bettina Bergo (2020), Levinasian anxiety points to “the immediacy and endurance of

our interconnection with one other” (471), and after all, it “motivates our taking responsibility for others” (31). In both films, anxiety is connected to encounters that highlight a shared materiality. It is directed towards interobjective relations (Sobchack 2004) rooted in material recognition that indicate the presence of alterity in the self. The two hybrid protagonists of the films show an ethical inclination towards animals that differentiates them from other characters. In both diegesis, hybridity is connected with negative affect but also with an openness to other creatures, with a relational attunement towards vulnerable beings. That is the principle of relation that connects the different agents and elements of the films, the way in which the affective quality of the body pushes the conceptual boundaries of the human. Such realization produces anxiety, but it might also engender an ethical form of relation through the recognition of vulnerability and of a shared material existence.

1/ All the dialogues and quotes from sources which are not in English have been translated by the author.

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