

Maternal Ambivalence in Lucrecia Martel's Salta Trilogy

Kunpeng Wu^{1,a,*}

¹The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University International Department,
Beijing, 100032, China

a. shixiaoxiao@hhu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Lucrecia Martel is celebrated as one of Argentina's premier female directors, with her distinctive body of work gaining international recognition. This paper delves into Martel's oeuvre, particularly her acclaimed Salta Trilogy: *The Swamp* (2001), *The Holy Girl* (2004), and *The Headless Woman* (2008). Through a close examination of these films, the paper explores Martel's unique narrative style, which is notably characterized by a childlike perspective and an unconventional emphasis on sound. These elements play a crucial role in shaping her portrayal of motherhood within the trilogy. The analysis reveals that Martel presents motherhood as a multifaceted and often contradictory experience, deeply influenced by personal, familial, and societal pressures, encapsulating the concept of maternal ambivalence. By investigating the intricate relationships between mothers and their children and the recurring motif of "the call," the paper underscores the emotional disconnection and psychological struggles inherent in these maternal roles, offering a profound insight into the complexities of motherhood as depicted in Martel's films.

Keywords: Lucrecia Martel, Salta Trilogy, maternal ambivalence, motherhood.

1. Introduction

Lucrecia Martel is one of the most well-known Argentine female directors. She is an innovative film director whose works are recognized as strange, mysterious, and sensorial films. Being seen as a member of the aesthetic experimentalist wave, Martel emerges from the "New Argentine Cinema". Among her feature-length films, *The Swamp* (La ciénaga, 2001), *The Holy Girl* (La niña santa, 2004), and *The Headless Woman* (La mujer sin cabeza, 2008) are often referred to as the "Salta Trilogy".

Focusing on Martel's Salta Trilogy, this paper examines the "maternal ambivalence" represented through Martel's distinctive narrative of adolescence, unique emphasis on sound, and the repetition of the theme of "the call" [1].

2. The Representation of Motherhood in Martel's Salta Trilogy

Martel presents a multifaceted representation of motherhood, depicting it as a complex, often contradictory experience shaped by personal, familial, and societal factors in her Salta Trilogy.

2.1. Mecha in *The Swamp*

In *The Swamp*, Mecha, played by Graciela Borges exemplifies a mother who is physically present but emotionally absent. Mecha's constant drinking and self-absorption symbolize her escape from the burdens of motherhood and the responsibilities of running a household. Her physical injury from falling on wine glasses serves as a poignant symbol of her vulnerability and incapacity to care for herself or her family. Being forced to assume adult responsibilities, Mecha's children and servants run their dilapidated rural estate. They drive without licenses, use firearms, and engage in dangerous activities, highlighting the lack of maternal nurturing and guidance. Additionally, Mecha's fear of ending up like her bedridden mother reveals her internal conflict and ambivalence towards her maternal role, and the challenges of motherhood are passed down through generations.

2.2. Helena in *The Holy Girl*

In *The Holy Girl*, Martel explores the tension between Helena, a distant and self-absorbed mother, and her daughter Amalia, who seeks meaning and identity through her intense religious beliefs. Helena, played by Mercedes Morán, is more concerned with her romantic entanglements and social life than her daughter's needs. This ambivalence towards her maternal duties is evident in her superficial interactions with Amalia. The strained relationship between Helena and Amalia reflects their conflicting values and beliefs. Amalia's mission to save Dr. Jano, a guest at the hotel who sexually harassed her, underscores her desire to find purpose beyond her mother's influence. Helena's lack of understanding and support for Amalia's spiritual quest highlights the ideological and generational divide between them. The film also explores how societal and religious expectations shape the mother-daughter relationship, complicating their interactions in a societal context.

2.3. Verónica in *The Headless Woman*

In *The Headless Woman*, the protagonist Verónica, played by María Onetto, experiences a traumatic event that leaves her in a state of emotional and psychological disconnection. Following a car accident in which she believes she may have killed someone, Verónica suffers from amnesia, which serves as a metaphor for her detachment from her family and maternal responsibilities. Her disorientation and alienation reflect her struggle to reconcile her identity as a mother with her personal crisis. The societal pressures placed on Verónica to maintain her role as a mother and wife, despite her inner turmoil, highlight the demands placed on women to conform to traditional maternal roles, and these expectations exacerbate Verónica's sense of fragmentation and isolation.

3. Adolescent Narrative and Haptic Shots

A prominent feature of Martel's filmmaking style is her use of a childlike narrative perspective. She mentions that she endeavors to capture scenes from the viewpoint of a ten-year-old, allowing for a portrayal that is free from biases and imbued with curiosity [2]. To achieve this childlike narrative, she deliberately avoids establishing shots, which are typically associated with rationality, contrasting sharply with the nature of adolescence. This technique fragments spaces into individual parts, making the geography closely linked to emotions and psychological associations [3].

Another notable aspect of Martel's style is her use of haptic shots. In her *Salta Trilogy*, these shots highlight hands touching glass, moving through hair, or hovering over radiators, with close-ups of textures like fabric, skin, and hair. Laura Marks explains that haptic shots evoke a visceral and emotional response, engaging directly with the senses [4]. This approach creates a physical connection between the viewer and the image, enhancing the sensory experience of the film. Martel uses this method to create a sense of seeing something anew, evoking sensory revelations that reflect

the experiential world of youth. Joanna Page states that children experiment with sound and vision to induce such revelations in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*; for instance, in *The Swamp*, young girls speak into a fan to distort their voices, and in *The Holy Girl*, Josefina and Amalia explore how their vision changes after pressing their eyes shut [5]. This haptic technique immerses the audience not only visually but also physically into the adolescent perspective, where rationality is questioned, and emotions drive judgments.

Viewing motherhood through this lens reveals its deep ambivalence, characterized by complexity and contradictions as described by Parker [1]. It can be both suffocating and comforting. This duality arises partly from Martel's emphasis on the limitations and excesses of sensory experiences like vision, sound, and touch [1]. For instance, Helena in *The Holy Girl* undergoes a hearing test requested by Dr. Jano. She sits in a soundproof booth, wearing headphones, and repeats a series of random words. Although she accurately repeats most words, she confuses the word "madres" (mothers) with "males" (evils), suggesting a subconscious link to the "bad" mother archetype in a patriarchal society—an archetype defined as one who does not meet the ideal of the selfless, tireless nurturer [6]. Helena fits into the stereotypical role of a bad mother since she does not live in a conventional nuclear family, and she fails to protect her child from harm [7].

4. Unique Emphasis on Sound

Besides the adolescent narrative and haptic shots, there is one more notable aspect of Martel's filmmaking: the primacy of sound. She emphasizes sound from the inception of her projects, noting that before she begins writing, she already envisions the film's auditory landscape [8]. In a way, visuals serve to encapsulate the sound. This auditory focus creates a tangible connection to the physical and intangible elements of her films, especially in *The Swamp*, where corporeality is a central theme. Sound in Martel's films is deeply intertwined with femininity and motherhood, often reflecting the experiences of her female characters. According to Russell, motifs related to motherhood crises are evident, as whenever Mecha appears on screen, telephones ring, symbolizing her declining ability to manage external pressures [4]. Similarly, her cousin Tali struggles to hear herself amidst the chaos of children's voices, symbolizing the overwhelming nature of motherhood: Tali is engulfed in the noise, barely able to hear her own thoughts [4]. These instances portray motherhood as a confining and suffocating experience.

Conversely, Martel utilizes acousmatic sounds—those without a visible source—throughout her films [9]. These sounds, like dripping taps and distant barks, function both atmospherically and thematically. In *The Holy Girl*, a musician plays the theremin, which manipulates invisible signals, while students are taught to listen for God's voice, underscoring the link between sound and spiritual experiences. Aguilar states that for a child in the womb, the mother's voice is peculiarly acousmatic, emphasizing the profound nature of early auditory experiences. This dynamic is reciprocal; the mother learns about her child through sounds, such as the heartbeat detected by ultrasound. Martel's acousmatic soundscapes thus evoke a womb-like environment, highlighting how sound can be felt as much as heard [4].

In *The Holy Girl*, sound's importance extends to both visual and thematic aspects. The story centers on a medical conference at a hotel managed by Helena and her brother Freddy. The subject of vestibular disorders is visually echoed with numerous close-ups of ears. Martel compares the ear to a shell, connecting it to water—a recurring feminine symbol in her films. Water bodies, such as swamps, pools, and canals, are depicted with duality. For example, in *The Swamp*, stagnant water symbolizes both life and decay, attracting and repelling children. Similarly, in *The Headless Woman*, rain described as "una bendición" also causes a foul-smelling flood. Helena's link to the thermal pool in *The Holy Girl* reflects her past as a skilled diver, contrasting with her current hearing issues.

The emphasis on the ear in *The Holy Girl* also carries deeper implications for motherhood. The ear's shape is reminiscent of a small fetus, and alternative medicine suggests it reflects the entire body. From the beginning, the film introduces the unborn twins of "that woman" who has replaced Helena in her roles as wife and mother. These twins exert a psychological influence on Helena, symbolically present through the aural disturbances she faces. The film's focus on ears highlights the ambiguity of sound perception, pointing to a profound motherhood's crisis.

5. The Call

The relationship between sound and the challenges of motherhood is prominently illustrated through the motif of "the call," which recurs in Martel's Salta Trilogy. This motif encompasses both literal and figurative calls. On one hand, persistent telephone calls are haunting the female protagonists in her Salta Trilogy, instilling a sense of fear and avoidance. On the other, there exists a figurative interpretation of the concept of calling.

Firstly, in *The Swamp*, Mecha's ignorance of the incessantly ringing phone symbolizes her struggle to meet the expectations of motherhood. Secondly, in *The Headless Woman*, Vero's phone ringing leads to a tragic accident where she hits a boy, with the phone's haunting presence echoing throughout the film as if it were a child's call from beyond. Often, Vero ignores the calls, but at times she answers only to abruptly disconnect. Last but not least, similarly, Helena receives repeated calls from her ex-husband's pregnant wife in *The Holy Girl*, which she consistently declines.

In the aforementioned scenarios, the call represents fear and refusal, encroaching upon the characters' idealized views of motherhood. However, Amalia, the holy girl, responds differently. For her, the call embodies a sense of vocation—a concept introduced through her catechetical education, closely tied to motherhood in the Catholic tradition. Believing in the divine plan, Amalia insists she has been chosen to save Dr. Jano. In the street where Jano exploits the crowd around a theremin musician to approach her, Amalia embarks on a peculiar journey of seduction aimed at his redemption. Rather than strictly adhering to the rules of vocation, she intuitively responds to its essence, finding empowerment in her actions and breaking away from the negative cycles evident in the maternal figures around her.

The contrast between Amalia and her cousin, Josefina, underscores the purity of Amalia's intentions. When their catechetical instructor, Inés, tries to clarify the vocation's meaning, Josefina's response undermines the Catholic teachings. Echoing the serpent in Eden, she casts doubt on Inés's virtue, suggesting she has been seen in a romantic situation with an elder man. Unlike Amalia, who embraces a more profound understanding of calling, Josefina follows a literal interpretation of Church teachings, maintaining her virginity while engaging in anal sex with her cousin, consciously avoiding intimacy.

Amalia's proactive engagement contrasts sharply with Josefina's passive stance. During the second encounter with Jano, Amalia intentionally positions herself in front of him, tries to touch his hand, and gazes into his eyes, compelling him to retreat in fear and escape. This empowerment allows her to transcend the victim role and assume the active role of a savior or heroine, in stark contrast to the passive experiences of the women surrounding her. As Ana Forcinito observes, Helena is depicted primarily as an object of Jano's gaze, observed from a distance as he watches her sunbathe or arrives at the hotel. In contrast, Amalia's empowerment is evident as she actively gazes at Dr. Jano from various angles—at the poolside, in the elevator, and even in his room, subverting the objectification faced by her mother.

The other maternal figures in the trilogy reflect a similar passivity and conflict. The representation of the motherhood of Vero is characterized by absence—not only of her biological daughter but also in her evasion of responsibility for the killed boy. Mecha appears destined to replicate her own mother's path. The ending scenario of *The Holy Girl* depicts Amalia and Josefina floating together in

a thermal pool, echoing, “Hello, hello, do you hear?” This moment signifies Amalia’s readiness to rise above the maternal crises that ensnare the other women in Martel’s Salta Trilogy.

6. Maternal Ambivalence

In Martel’s Salta trilogy, the repercussions of maternal ambivalence reverberate through familial bonds, triggering a profound crisis that disrupts the entire family dynamic. Mecha’s dysfunction in *The Swamp*, symbolized by the stagnant swamp and decaying swimming pool, visibly affects her children, who alternately compensate for their parents’ neglect yet struggle with chronic lethargy and ennui, moving listlessly from one bed to another.

Two troubled domestic relationships stand out. Firstly, between elder siblings Verónica and José, whose intense physical proximity hints at underlying tensions, exacerbated when José announces his departure to Buenos Aires to be with his older lover and boss, Mercedes. Verónica’s jealousy is palpable, particularly evident when José intrudes playfully while she showers, blurring familial boundaries. José’s fluid sexuality complicates their dynamic, captured ambiguously by Martel’s camera, especially in scenes where he tends to Mecha, initially seeming intimate but revealing familial complexities upon closer examination.

Secondly, the strained relationship between Momi and Isabel, the family’s indigenous maid, is fraught with ambiguity. Initially portrayed with tender closeness as Momi lies beside Isabel, their bond shifts as Isabel oscillates between friendship and maternal support, withdrawing when Momi becomes pregnant and chooses a life with her boyfriend. Momi’s emotional scars from maternal neglect, symbolized by a rash from contaminated pool water, fuel her infatuation with Isabel, blending a yearning for maternal care with an evolving, quasi-erotic desire. This queer longing hints at power dynamics, echoed in Momi’s adoption of her mother’s racist attitudes upon Isabel’s departure, culminating in a confrontation where Momi accuses Mecha of a fate she fears—dying in bed like her mother.

These relationships underscore complex power struggles rooted in parental failures, themes that peak in *The Headless Woman*, the trilogy’s final installment. Here, the crisis extends beyond biological motherhood to encompass broader notions of maternal responsibility. Vero’s descent into moral ambiguity, triggered by a car accident involving a child, illustrates this theme. Her attempts to deny her guilt—initially dismissing the incident as insignificant—are futile as haunting reminders persist, symbolized by persistent phone calls and dissonant sounds that disrupt her facade of normalcy.

Martel’s cinematography portrays Vero’s regression to adolescence, marked by emotional immaturity reminiscent of other adults in the trilogy [10]. This regression becomes ominous post-accident, highlighting a crisis in maternal identity. Vero’s attempt to resume her dental practice masks an underlying vacancy, revealed in her disoriented state until others intervene to maintain her illusion of normality. This facade extends to familial and social circles, where complicit adults shield her from accountability, denying her truth in favor of preserving a semblance of order. In choosing adolescent recklessness over empowerment, Vero forfeits her agency, submitting to societal forces that obscure her reality.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines the theme of maternal ambivalence in Lucrecia Martel’s Salta Trilogy. By analyzing *The Swamp*, *The Holy Girl*, and *The Headless Woman* in detail, the conclusions drawn illustrate how Martel presents motherhood as a multifaceted and often contradictory experience influenced by personal, familial, and societal pressures. Through her unique narrative style, characterized by a childlike perspective, haptic shots, and an unconventional emphasis on sound,

Martel portrays the complexities and emotional disconnections inherent in the maternal roles of her characters.

However, the study is not without limitations. While comprehensive in exploring the Salta Trilogy, it leaves room for further examination of Martel's other works and their treatment of similar themes. Future research may delve into how Martel's depiction of motherhood compares to other contemporary Argentine filmmakers or explore the broader societal implications of her narrative techniques.

In conclusion, Martel's films offer profound insights into the complexities of motherhood, underscoring the intricate relationships between mothers and their children and the recurring motif of "the call." These films challenge traditional perceptions of maternal roles and highlight the emotional struggles and societal expectations that shape the experiences of motherhood. Martel's work ultimately invites viewers to reflect on the nuanced and often ambivalent nature of maternal relationships, offering a rich tapestry of themes for continued exploration and discussion.

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