

La mujer sin cabeza/The Headless Woman
(Lucrecia Martel, 2008): silence, historical
memory and metaphor

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Argentina. The present. Three children and a dog play close to an isolated country road. Middle-aged dentist, wife and mother Verónica (María Onetto) – known by all as Vero – is driving home. Distracted by the ringing of her mobile phone, she hits something or someone but doesn't leave the car to discover who or what she has collided with. Dazed and confused, she goes to hospital but walks out prematurely, checking into a hotel where she bumps into and then sleeps with her cousin's husband, Juan Manuel (Daniel Genoud). Returning home, she remains in a daze, barely connecting with her husband, Marcos (César Bordón), or her colleagues at work. When she confesses to her husband that she fears she may have hit a person, they return to the scene of the crime, but her husband insists that she only hit a dog. Her husband speaks to well-connected friends to try and discover if there are rumours of any hit-and-run accident. News circulates in the community that a child has disappeared. Vero continues with her social engagements – visits to her elderly aunt Lala (María Vaner) and cousin Josefina (Claudia Cantero), whose teenage daughter, Candita (Inés Efron), recovering from hepatitis, writes Vero love letters. Vero's husband liaises with family and friends in the town to ensure that all traces of the accident – her visit to the hospital, damage to the car, her stay at the hotel – are removed. The child is discovered, presumed drowned, in the canal.

Transnational cinema and historical memory

Recent scholarship on transnational cinema has questioned long-held understandings of what might be termed an 'authentic' national film. For Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, the transnational – 'understood as the global forces

that link people or institutions across nations' – itself announces 'the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence' (2006: 1). The currency of funding film features in an age of high capitalism necessitates a culture where monies are raised from a range of sources based on economic (rather than national) priorities. Migration, exile and internationalism have all served to interrogate established understandings of what constitutes 'the national' and how it is articulated in a world order where the global exchange of capital and information effectively reterritorialises both the First and Third Worlds. While English as a second language may be the *lingua franca* of advanced global capitalism, the growing economic might of Latin America has rendered it an attractive partner for a Spanish state struggling within the precarious situation of a boom-and-bust economy. Spain's ex-Prime Minister José María Aznar may have opted to affiliate himself with the economic might (and right-wing credentials) of George Bush's USA, but his foreign investments were firmly located in Latin America (Martín and Toral 2005). His successor, José María Rodríguez Zapatero, chose to publicly associate himself with its southern neighbours, *el cono sur*, citing a shared neocolonial linguistic heritage – *la hispanidad* – (rather than a problematic colonial past) in which discourses of origins and purity have no part. As political researcher Susanne Gratius recognised in *El País* in 2010, 'Más que ser una prioridad de política exterior, América Latina es un asunto interno' [More than a foreign policy priority, Latin America is an internal matter]. Investment in Latin America remains an economic necessity for global Spanish brands such as Telefónica and Banco Santander, seeking to emerge from the economic crisis that generated a central deficit gap of €99,785 billion in 2009 and took Spain's unemployment from 8.3 per cent in 2007 to 24.4 per cent at the end of March 2012 (Anon. 2011; BBC 2012).

Spanish cinema has long recognised the potential and possibilities of the Latin American film market. Spanish America is a lucrative economic marketplace for the exchange of cultural wares – with expanding populations having access to both increased disposable income and modes of representation – and equally an attractive potential investor in the manufacturing process.¹ Films that have benefited from enhanced production investment, high production values, star actors and conspicuous marketing and distribution budgets are able to circulate more effectively across national borders. This is evident in the trajectories of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Woody Allen, 2008) and *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010). Indeed, both these films indicate that, in order to compete more aggressively in a market where it is the mainstream (genre-driven cinema with familiar plots and actors) that has habitually performed at the box office,² Spanish producers have strategically opted to put together their own super-productions. The refashioning of genre pics against the 'exotic' landscapes of Spain – picture-postcard Barcelona in the case of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and the gritty, dangerous 'other' of the city in *Biutiful* – has certainly been one

approach. *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* works within the paradigms of the genre pic; *Biutiful*, on the other hand, proffers a take on the Odysseus myth as a contemporary Ulysses wanders through an urban metropolis, both the agent and victim of his own misfortune.

Both films, like Guillermo del Toro's *El laberinto del Fauno*/*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and *Los abrazos rotos*/*Broken Embraces* (2009), also provide further evidence of the status of Spanish as a major world language (no longer the case with French, Italian or German, the traditional stalwarts of European arthouse cinema). Spanish-language culture is a marketable commodity and the wave of co-productions that have accommodated popular genres (as with the Spanish-set horror features of Guillermo del Toro and Rigoberto Castañeda's *KM 31* [2006]), romantic comedies (Juan José Campanella's *El secreto de sus ojos*/*The Secret in Their Eyes* [2009]), thrillers (Marcelo Piñeyro's *Las viudas de los jueves*/*Thursday's Widows* [2010]) and road movies (Steven Soderbergh's *Che* [2008]) point to a greater confidence in the mobility of Spanish-language products across the global economy.

As a general rule, since 2000, about a quarter of the films produced in Spain have been co-productions with Latin America.³ The attractions of such co-productions are evident: potential audiences across Spanish America, the possibility of planting high-profile Latin stars who can help sell a feature, the exchange of technical crews and specialist expertise. While a significant number of the examples I have drawn on above are Mexican–Spanish co-productions, it is Argentina that has proved Spain's most conspicuous partner in the area of two-way and three-way co-productions since the turn of the century. In 2009 Spain and Argentina were involved in 7 of the 30 two-way co-productions realised that year and a further 6 of the 16 three-way co-productions. In 2008 this figure was 13 of 39 and 1 of 3, respectively. In 2002 Argentina already led the way, with 9 of the two-way co-productions made that year: in 2003 the figure was 6 of the 25 two-way co-productions between both countries.

These figures are significant in that they testify to the growing importance of Argentina as a co-producing partner on a breadth of commercial Spanish features, from Carlos Saura's *Tango* (1998) to Ramón Costafreda's *Abrigatel Wrap Up* (2007). Significantly, Spain has also come on board as a co-producer on projects that do not necessarily feature Spanish characters or a Spanish locale but rather 'invest' in a trend, such as the New Argentine Cinema – the generation of film school-educated independent filmmakers whose poetic, neo-realist aesthetic and move away from the studio-bound, magic realist whimsy and/or political didacticism of their predecessors marked a decisive shift in Argentine filmmaking.⁴ This was an enterprising 'poor' cinema with a pseudo-documentary feel (including a recourse to non-professional actors) and a reliance on handheld camera work. Grouped under the title New Argentine Cinema, the filmmakers who emerged in the years between 1995 and 2002 embraced a variety of styles

and genres, from the black, droll humour of Martín Rejtman's *Silvia Prieto* (1999) to the austere black-and-white long single takes and sparse narrative of Trapero's *Mundo grúa/Crane World* (1999). Their playful games with genre – the con movie in Fabián Bielinsky's *Nueve reinas/Nine Queens* (2001) and the road movie in Diego Lerman's *Tan de repente/Suddenly* (2002) – offered new possibilities for invigorating well-worn formulas. Spain wanted to 'buy into' the kudos around the New Argentine Cinema and moved in to invest in a number of productions directed by the most conspicuous brand names of this new 'national' cinema.⁵ The minimalist environmental films of Lisandro Alonso have found Spanish support through Luis Miñarro, Spain's most adventurous independent producer,⁶ who had a 20 per cent stake in *Liverpool* (2008). Fabián Bielinsky's follow-up to *Nine Queens*, *El aura/The Aura* (2005), was funded by a 43 per cent Spanish stake from Tornasol. Tornasol also enjoyed a 54 per cent investment in the Oscar-winning *The Secret in Their Eyes*.

Certainly, while economic interests are paramount in film investment, I would argue that further factors may perhaps account for the particular thematics that have dominated a number of the most conspicuous Spanish–Argentine co-productions of recent years. Co-productions, made possible through globalisation, have also taken globalisation as a central motif – as with Gerardo Herrero's *El corredor nocturno/Night Runner* (2009). The legacy of recent dictatorships has also proved a potent subject for nations negotiating the move to democratic structures. In 2007, the then Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero introduced the contentious Law 52/2007, *Ley de Memoria Histórica* [law of historical memory], in the face of vociferous opposition from right-wing interests fronted by the Partido Popular [PP or People's Party]. After decades of the *pacto de olvido* [pact of silence] that effectively suppressed discussions of the Republican dead in the years after democracy was restored to Spain, the law allows for a confrontation of the more uncomfortable legacies of the Civil War and its aftermath.⁷ It is thought that 100,000 dead lie in mass graves across Spain, victims of nationalist aggression in the Civil War and its aftermath.

Spain has not been alone in introducing legislation that has sought to come to terms with a dictatorial past and its human rights violations. Argentina, too, has its own quota of *desaparecidos*, who were eradicated by the military *junta* that seized power in 1976. Between 1976 and 1983, when Raúl Alfonsín's civilian government came to power, over 30,000 Argentines were aggressively detained by the military regime and never seen again. Alfonsín and his successor Carlos Menem effectively introduced a *pacto de olvido* of their own, offering only the most cursory recognition of the atrocities committed by the four generals – Jorge Videla, Roberto Eduardo Viola, Leopoldo Galtieri and Reynaldo Bignone – who headed the *junta*, and effectively introducing legislation to protect both the police and military who had executed the country's 'Dirty War'.

President Nestor Kirchner (2003–07) and his wife and successor Cristina

Fernández de Kirchner (2007–), however, have offered no such impunity to those responsible, allowing for the systematic introduction of a new national discourse of human rights that has at its centre an embracing of historical memory as a cornerstone of governmental policy. Like Zapatero – whose grandfather was a Republican executed by nationalists – Kirchner was directly affected by the *junta*'s crackdown on political dissent and opposition and imprisoned twice in the 1970s for his political opinions. His desire to affiliate himself as an heir to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo [an association of Argentine mothers of those who disappeared], his conspicuous role in mobilising supporters on what remains of the Navy School of Mechanics [ESMA] – arguably the most notorious of the *junta*'s clandestine detention centres – and his pledge to convert it into a museum to honour the victims of the dictatorship, as well as the trial of 13 ESMA officers in 2009 have effectively positioned the Kirchners as visible advocates for a politics grounded in the need to come to terms with past human-rights atrocities.⁸

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that in two nations where political leaders have positioned themselves in close relationship to public accountability for historical crimes, issues of historical memory should prove an influential trope in contemporary filmmaking. In Argentina, Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios/The Blonds* (2003), Nicolás Prividera's *M* (2003), Lucía Cedrón's *Cordero de dios/Lamb of God* (2008), Israel Adrián Caetano's *Crónica de una fuga 1977/Buenos Aires 1977* (2006) and Jonathan Perel's *El Predio/The Lot* (2010) have all gravitated around the terrain of the disappeared. In Spain, there have been biopics revisiting victims of Francoism – Manuel Huerga's *Salvador* (2006), the treatment of the arrest and garroting of anarchist Salvador Puig Antich – and tales of lives truncated by the culture of dictatorship – Ventura Pons's *Barcelona (un mapa)/Barcelona (A Map)* (2007). Unflinching assessments of nationalist atrocities and abuses refracted through horror – *Pan's Labyrinth* – and drama – *Pà negre/Black Bread* (2010) – have also been accompanied by tales of hidden traumas unearthed through the mundane and the worldly – Jordi Cadena and Judith Colell's *Elisa K* (2010) – as well as the other-worldly – Julio Medem's *Caótica Ana/Chaotic Ana* (2007) and J.A. Bayona's *El orfanato/The Orphanage* (2007). Isaki Lacuesta's *Los condenados/The Damned* (2009) takes place in an unnamed country that we presume is Argentina, as two old friends come together to unearth the body of a colleague who 'disappeared' during what is presumed to be Argentina's military dictatorship or the period immediately preceding it. *The Secret in Their Eyes*, a prominent Spanish–Argentine co-production, uses a romance-cum-thriller with the structural conceit of an unsolved murder as the hinge for a probing examination of historical memory, vigilante justice and modes of interrogating the abuses of the past in a country scarred by the collective memory of a brutal military dictatorship.⁹

Even Pedro Almodóvar has acknowledged a political inflection to his recent

work grounded in issues of historical memory (see Delgado 2009). The focus on the ghosts of the past that return to haunt the present in *Volver* (2006) and both the issue of amnesia and the relationship between individual and institutional discourses of mourning in *Broken Embraces* articulate a national trauma embedded in the necessity of coming to terms with the abuses of the Civil War and Franco's regime. *La piel que habito*/*The Skin I Live In* (2011) touches on the theme of the disappeared, as a new identity is imposed on a kidnapped youth by the charismatic patriarch whose veneer of respectability masks a refusal to work within the limits of the law.¹⁰ It is perhaps not insignificant that Almodóvar's production company, El Deseo, was the Spanish co-producer of Lucrecia Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza*/*The Headless Woman* (2008), the film that I will focus on for the remainder of this chapter.¹¹ Almodóvar had previously co-produced Martel's second film *La niña santa*/*The Holy Girl* (2004), having admired the elegant craftsmanship and seductive savagery of her first film, *La ciénaga*/*The Swamp* (2001) (Almodóvar 2009a).

There are certainly points of contact between Martel's three films: the languid pacing, the attention to frame composition, the camera's role as a microscope that gives us a brutal close-up into middle-class angst and self-destruction, the ominous sense of impending chaos that hovers over the action threatening to unravel at any moment, the stagnating environment (unnamed, but actually Martel's home province of Salta in northern Argentina) in which her characters function, the complex soundscape – evident in the rasping sound of the chairs being dragged across the patio in the opening scene of *The Swamp*. While her first two features had garnered positive reviews when premièred at the Berlin and Cannes Festivals, respectively, *The Headless Woman* attracted more perplexed responses when it was first seen at Cannes in 2008 (Anon. 2008; Romney 2010). The hostile tone of a significant proportion of these effectively delayed the Argentine premièred of the film (Enríquez 2008). As with Almodóvar's *Broken Embraces*, which similarly disappointed critics on its initial release in Spain,¹² I would argue, however, that the film enunciates a trauma of collective guilt and grief that remains unarticulated in overt narrative terms. A hit-and-run contemporary thriller where plot gradually gives way to metaphor, *The Headless Woman* clinically dissects the mechanisms that operate a culture of the disappeared.

Metaphor and political parable

Two worlds come into sharp contrast at the beginning of *The Headless Woman*. There is the world of Argentina's 'haves' embodied through the film's protagonist – the elegant, disengaged middle-class dentist Vero and the privileged bourgeois society of which she is part. The film's second sequence sees Vero bidding farewell to her family and friends after a lunch party. Small children play obtrusively

around the large Volvo and Rover cars – symbols of Western affluence and affiliation – irritatingly refusing to listen to the commands of their elders.

These strident children are contrasted with the ‘have-nots’, the cleaners and gardeners who labour silently in the background, quietly and efficiently servicing the needs of Vero and her extended family. When Vero fears she may have killed a child from the other side of the tracks – one of the ‘have-nots’ – the patriarchs of the family close in to protect their interests. Interestingly, the child she may (or may not) have killed, because she was reaching for her mobile phone while driving, is first seen playing with a sibling and a dog at the side of the road – effectively on the margins from the film’s opening. Vero is never sure if she has killed a child or a dog – in her world there is something shockingly interchangeable about what they represent. She never approaches the faceless shape on the asphalt – from a distance, it looks like a dog, but the glance is too fleeting to be reliable. The storm that hangs over the early part of the film – and which then keeps Vero within the confines of the hotel where she seeks refuge from the incident – may not have erased all traces of the hit-and-run accident, but the bourgeois family will ensure that any evidence that remains is decisively and definitely disposed of.

The Swamp and *The Holy Girl* can also be read as allegorical tales of domestic decomposition. In the former, two middle-class families now fallen on hard times refuse to face the realities of their shabby estate – brilliantly conceptualised by the dirty, festering pool around which the adults drunkenly congregate in the film’s opening scene. In the latter film, a teenage girl’s sexual awakening takes place in the context of the run-down hotel – a transient environment – managed by her drunken mother and uncle, where a medical conference is taking place. I would argue, however, that *The Headless Woman* is Martel’s most overtly political film to date. Her visual and sonic landscape highlights the social schisms that underpin Argentine society: the poor who wait for treatment at the bleak local hospital, the faceless prisoner shackled to guards in the hospital bathroom, the masseur who visits Vero at home, the boy who cleans the car (seen only as a silhouette by the door), the elderly garden-centre attendant and his assistants who struggle noisily with the large pots Vero purchases to adorn her garden, the shadowy servants with indigenous features only ever partially in view. Martel opts for wide-screen Cinemascope that leaves these toiling figures slightly out of focus. Their stories are filtered through windows, glass doors and water, keeping the primary focus firmly on María Onetto’s traumatised Vero.

Vero remains an enigma for much of the film. The viewer discovers that she is a dentist the morning after the accident, when she takes a taxi into work and remains in the waiting room as if killing time waiting for treatment. She refuses to take responsibility for her patients – much as she refuses to take responsibility for the accident.¹³ The Vero who emerges post-accident is a dazed being: she commits adultery with her cousin’s husband at a hotel in an encounter that



25. The shadowy presence of the 'have nots' in contrast to the prominent Vero (María Onetto).

appears out of character. She avoids her husband when he returns to the house from his hunting expedition bringing the bleeding corpse of the *corzuela* (a small native deer) – a proxy for the victim of the accident – into her domestic space. She is a woman out of joint, whose visits to the house of her elderly, bedridden Aunt Lala cause bemusement. She appears to be unsure of who she is or where she has come from, looking at images from her past – as with her grainy wedding video – as if they are revealing an 'other' person. 'Tan hermosa estabas. ¿Para qué arruinarte?' [You were so beautiful. Why let yourself go?], Lala asks the immaculate Vero. As such, Lala's comments appear to refer to a moral rather than a physical decomposition. Significant here is the name Vero – short for Verónica. In Italian – over half of Argentina's 40 million population are thought to be of Italian descent – *vero* means truth. Only Vero seems to be unable to cope with the veracity of the situation in which she finds herself, and allows for a different 'trust' to be constructed.¹⁴ I am not the first to note that it is as if Vero is constructing an identity for herself – an event that can be read against the context of the 'new' identities constructed for the children of the disappeared, stolen from their parents and farmed out to affluent families who were compliant with the authorities during the 'Dirty War'.¹⁵

As in *The Swamp* and *The Holy Girl*, the swimming pool emerges as a key motif in the film: a space of putrefaction, rot and decay.¹⁶ In the former, it is a metaphor for Mecha's dysfunctional family and their predicament: dirty and uncared-for. In the latter it is a steamy, humid thermal spa where the adolescent Amalia and her friend Josefina share sexual and religious complicities and desires. In *The Headless Woman* it may be a more openly enticing locale but it is nevertheless cast as an arena of social exclusion, associated with moral neglect and hermetically sealed from the world beyond. The new pool (and the malignant life that Vero's cousin Josefina – Claudia Cantero – fears will threaten it because of

its proximity to the local vet's) is a hot topic of discussion for Vero's cousins and friends as they discuss who will attend its grand opening.

Water is a conduit in *The Headless Woman*: Vero is dripping wet from the heavy rain when she arrives at the hospital. 'Es una bendición este agua' [This water is a blessing], she is told as she hovers in the doorway of the building; Vero takes a shower on returning home, as if wanting to cleanse and purify her body and so eradicate any lingering evidence of her adultery; a bottle of water is brought to Vero by the kind *mestizo* welder at work as she weeps uncontrollably in the changing rooms and is poured over her in a religious gesture of purification and absolution; water transports the body of the disappeared boy down the canal. Rain doesn't wash away Vero's sin but rather confines her to wander as if suspended in a fish tank. Martel has spoken of the fish tank as an appropriate analogy for the world in which her characters are placed (2008). Vero spends much of the film in a suspended state and the film – placing the viewer in the position of its disorientated protagonist – articulates Martel's view of humanity as consistently dangling within what she terms 'an elastic fluid, it might be water but also air. We habitually forget that we are immersed in air' (2008). In *The Headless Woman* the viewer floats alongside Vero. At the hospital, in the immediate aftermath of the accident, Vero wanders through the corridors and public spaces as if in a trance, and has to be guided through the procedures by overworked nurses. The elderly woman sitting next to her in the waiting room comments to the man with her that 'Se está durmiendo la señora' [The lady is falling asleep] – signalling Vero's sleepwalking state. 'Me parece que estoy medio ... No me siento bien' [I feel a little ... I don't feel well], she confides to her dental assistant the following morning. For much of the film she appears to be moving at a more sluggish pace than everyone else. This sense of an unhinged world is further reinforced by Martel's framing: Vero is often positioned with friends and family members who are captured by the camera in incomplete form. The partially dismembered bodies – sometimes headless, sometimes with arms out of shot – offer the image of an amputated society. Vero's daughters are also significantly absent for much of the film: ostensibly studying law in Tucumán, only one of the two makes a brief appearance in the final sequences.

Even when Vero is able to confess that she might have killed someone, it is a simple statement to her husband in a crowded supermarket. He drives her to the scene of the crime to reassure her. 'No pasa nada' [nothing is wrong], he insists. While he persistently repeats that it was just a dog, however, the implications of the accident resonate through the film. '¿Qué hago?' [What should I do?], she asks him, but he is adamant that it is simply a question of getting some sleep. *The Headless Woman* charts Vero's journey from a shock-induced zombie-like lethargy to a re-engagement with the people and places that surround her as her husband and his accomplices (effectively the powers that be in the town) work

behind the scenes to ensure that public records in effect concur that ‘nothing’ happened.

A society in denial

El proceso voluntario de olvido necesita mecanismos muy complejos y sutiles.

[The voluntary process of forgetting necessitates very complex and subtle mechanisms.]

Lucrecia Martel (Climent 2008)

Like Juan Antonio Bardem in *Muerte de un ciclista/Death of a Cyclist* (1955), Martel uses the hit-and-run narrative to comment on a society in denial. While Vero never treats her servants (notably nameless) with the contempt that Mecha and her cousin Tali reserve for *los collas* – the racist term they use for their industrious domestic help – in *The Swamp*, there is also no evidence provided of a relationship with anyone outside her family that is not based on servicing her needs. This is a film about the unspoken privileges that underpin a society. Jonathan Romney has written of the ‘fishtank spaces’ where Vero’s family congregate in the film (2010). Martel favours cramped interiors that contain the characters and force them to coexist in the same frame. This further accentuates the depiction of social segregation that proved such a hallmark of her two earlier films.

Here, too, sound remains of paramount importance: servants attending to their daily tasks (sharpening knives, ordering taxis, brewing coffee); the noises of the large pots that Vero and her friends use to decorate their gardens being lifted by the elderly owner of the garden centre and his under-age assistants; children playing with their dog around the canal in the film’s opening sequence; the acute ringing of Vero’s mobile phone; the piercing sounds of the revellers at the pool; the repetitive scanning of items at the supermarket; the downpours of rain and claps of thunder; overlapping conversations at Lala’s house where the viewer can never be sure who is speaking. The buzzing sound of the many encounters that take place – some entirely off screen but partially audible – create the sense of a series of insects hovering around Vero. For Martel sound never involves incidental music but rather a heightened aural landscape: ‘Sound is the vibration of air. The only thing that physically touches you in the cinema is sound. You close your eyes and you will not see the movie, but sound still touches you, your body, all around’ (in Matheou 2010).

The eccentric, bedbound Lala – María Vaner with echoes of Chus Lampreave – a character that might have been lifted from one of co-producer Pedro Almodóvar’s early features, recognises that something is amiss. ‘Esa voz no parece tuya’ [That voice doesn’t appear to be yours], she tells Vero, but this is a family haunted by the living dead. The only person prepared to mention it is effectively self-imprisoned within her own bedroom, a madwoman in the attic whose rants

and ramblings are dismissed by those around her. Why are there children's clothes in Vero's house when her own daughters are supposedly grown up? What lies under Vero's garden? Are the handprints on Vero's car window those of her friends' children or those of the child she may have killed? Why does a young boy appear as Lala talks of the *espantos* [phantoms] that haunt the house? Is he the son of Lala's cook? Martel provides no concrete answers and opts instead for the systematic mapping of a culture where 'de eso no se habla' [we don't talk about that] (Monteagudo 2008).

It's the moral questions that resonate, repeatedly, through the film. *The Headless Woman* underlines the multiple ways in which a society eschews social responsibility. Vero even avoids discussing the amorous advances of her adolescent, convalescing feverish niece, Candita, whose love letters she ignores. Candita – the name evokes the Spanish *cándida* (candid) – wants direct answers: 'las cartas de amor se contestan o se devuelven' [love letters should be answered or returned], she informs Vero defiantly.¹⁷ Vero, however, appears pathologically welded to the culture of secrecy: there is an adulterous liaison with her cousin's husband, Juan Manuel (Daniel Genoud), to conceal also. Secrets, evasions, denials and lies appear to be a way of life for Vero and much of her extended family. Even her garden appears to have its secrets – a fountain or pool buried beneath it, discovered by the gardener. Is it any wonder that Josefina observes: 'En esta familia todos terminan perdiendo la cordura' [Everyone in our family ends up crazy].

Martel writes of the film having emerged both from her own personal nightmares of having killed someone and the damage that she experienced in the aftermath of a serious accident when she was 5 years old (2010). She visited a faith healer to address the trauma or, as she states it, so that her soul would return to her body: 'me gustó esa idea de cuerpo sin alma' [I liked that idea of the body without a soul] (in Enríquez 2008). I would argue that it is precisely this idea of a collective body without a soul – in effect, historical memory – that the film addresses. Certainly 'the disappeared' remains a resonant narrative device in the New Argentine Cinema and, I would argue, recent Spanish film. Martel's film differs from features like *Buenos Aires 1977* and *Black Bread*, however, in its approach: *The Headless Woman* is rooted in an ostensibly contemporary world – the unnamed north-western Salta landscape of her earlier films – that alludes only obliquely to the *junta* regime and its horrors. For Martel the silence of complicity is far more shocking than torture: 'Entiendo más la impiedad, la muerte y la violencia que la actitud del resto de la sociedad de hacerse la que no sabe, o evitar darse cuenta de lo que está pasando' [I understand cruelty, death and violence much more than the attitude of the rest of the society which makes out as if they don't know, or avoid coming to terms with what is happening] (in Enríquez 2008). *The Headless Woman* delineates how a culture of collective silencing is implemented across society's operational strata. Once Vero has revealed her

secret, her husband Marcos (Cesár Bordón) springs into action. Dressed in a camouflage jacket – suggesting an association with the military – he mobilises Juan Manuel, calling on the support of a web of doctors, lawyers and police to erase details of Vero's movements (the hospital X-rays, the hotel registration) on the night of the accident.

The 1970s infiltrates the ostensibly contemporary world of the film largely through a soundtrack where a version of Fernando Arbex Miró's 'Soley, Soley' and Hubert Giraud's 'Mammy Blue' position Vero and her family firmly within the ideology of the dictatorship. 'Soley, Soley' (presented in its 1971 recording by the Scottish band Middle of the Road) is playing on the car radio immediately before, during and after the accident. 'Deja de llorar' [Stop crying], another song by Miró from the mid-1970s, here covered by the Argentine band Los Charros, plays as Candita tries to confront Vero. 'Mammy Blue', sung by Demis Roussos, plays at the family party at the end of the film as Vero receives final confirmation from the hotel receptionist that there is no record of her having stayed there on the night of the accident. Martel has spoken of 'Mammy Blue' as a 'banda de sonido de la dictadura' [soundtrack of the dictatorship], recalling her own soldier uncle playing it on his guitar for her while she was a child (in Enríquez 2008). The songs resonate also across Spain – crooner Julio Iglesias, who represented Franco's Spain in the 1970 Eurovision Song Contest, recorded the latter in 1994. 'Soley, Soley' and 'Deja de llorar' were products of a Spanish songwriter who personified the transnational European easy-listening disco sound of the mid-1970s. Grainy wedding footage that Vero watches at Lala's house shows *Saturday Night Fever* dance routines that recall those re-created by Pablo Larraín in *Tony Manero* (2008). As with Alfredo Castro's deluded disco-dancing obsessive in Larraín's feature, Vero reinvents herself anew by dyeing her peroxide-blond hair a warm brown, attracting admiring comments from friends and family. By the end of the film – once she hears from her brother, a doctor at the hospital where she was treated, that he has destroyed all incriminating evidence – Vero blends effortlessly into the domestic landscape. In the first half of the film, Vero's haughty demeanour and blonde 'otherness' position her as a figure of allure and fascination. Her cousin's husband is evidently attracted to her, as is his 13-year old daughter, and her hair colour attracts favourable comments from a friend early on in the film. Jonathan Romney views her as a possible 'echo of the once idolised Eva Perón' (2010). I would argue that her synthetic blonderness also offers a link to Carri's *The Blonds*, where the family's 'otherness' is conceived through their artificial peroxide wigs. Vero is emphatically not the *cabecita negra* [little black head] of an Argentine working class made up of immigrants from the northern provinces bordering Bolivia.¹⁸

The Headless Woman may, on the surface, be the least accessible of Martel's features – a characteristic noted by the majority of the critics in the Spanish press, as well as *Variety*'s Leslie Felperin and the *Guardian*'s Xan Brooks – but it

is ultimately the most enigmatic, accomplished and rewarding. Certainly, there is no exposition and very little happens in narrative terms – something that bemused and irritated a significant proportion of the non-Argentine critics¹⁹ – but it is in the build-up of seemingly inconsequential details over the film's 89 minutes that its power ultimately lies. Martel's camera here appears as a further character, a mode of implicating the viewer within the unfolding trauma: a silent witness in the car with Vero; another member of the extended family at the social gatherings – a constant reminder of the absent 'other', the crime that no one will acknowledge. Only at the end of the film does the camera hold back, keeping its distance outside the room as Vero joins in the family party.

Spanish critics seemed willfully reluctant to accept the film as a parable on the collective history of the disappeared (Rodríguez-Marchante 2008; Boyero 2008), while the Argentine press corps who reported on the film's Cannes première as well as its domestic release in August of that year inscribed a reading centred on the film's circuitous references to the country's military dictatorship (Monteagudo 2008; López 2008). Martel has acknowledged that the film 'no se puede entender sin ciertos códigos' [can't be understood without certain codes] – which might explain the bemusement of the UK's Jonathan Romney and Xan Brooks on first viewing the film (Romney 2008; Brooks 2008). She is also aware of the shared context of military dictatorships and a particular religious education that has facilitated what she terms Almodóvar's empathetic 'lectura cercana' [close reading] of the film (in Enríquez 2008). Perhaps, like Vero and her family, the Spanish critics made a deliberate decision not to engage with a particular set of circumstances presented before them. *Clarín's* Diego Lerer has argued that Argentine history is a history of denials (2008), but I would posit that this is effectively also the case – as the *pacto de olvido* demonstrates – with regard to Spain. Like Bayona's *The Orphanage*, *The Headless Woman* is about the ways in which the repressed returns to haunt the collective psyche. As Romney's and Brook's responses indicate, metaphor does not always traverse national frontiers.²⁰ However, I would argue that Martel's disturbing film uses shared thematic references and suggestion to offer a commentary on both contemporary Argentina and contemporary Spain, as a house full of ghosts.²¹ Significantly, however, in confronting those ghosts through its own *mise en scène*, *The Headless Woman* also firmly undermines Lala's conservative advice: 'No los mires y se van' [If you don't look at them, they just go away].²²

Notes

- 1 Imperialist prerogatives in the culture of Spanish-Latin American co-productions are directly critiqued in Iciar Bollain's *También la lluvia/Even the Rain* (2010); see Chapter 17.
- 2 For details of the top grossing domestic features in Spain, see the Ministry of Culture's

- 'Boletín Informativo de Cine' 2002–09, 164–5. Annual reports for the years between 2002 and 2009 are available at www.mcu.es/cine/MC/BIC/index.html.
- 3 In 2000, of the 98 films made in Spain, 34 were co-productions. The figure in 2001 was 40 of 126; 2002, 57 of 137; 2003, 42 of 110; 2004, 41 of 133; 2005, 53 of 142; 2006, 41 of 150; 2007, 57 of 172; 2008, 49 of 173 and 2009, 51 of 186. Data collected from the 'Boletín Informativo de Cine' 2009.
 - 4 On the New Argentine Cinema, see Aguilar (2008); Andermann (2012); Page (2009).
 - 5 It is, of course, possible to present an argument that sees this as a further manifestation of neocolonialism, with Spain seeking to appropriate desirable products from South America.
 - 6 Miñarro's 2010 successes alone include the Cannes Palme D'Or winner Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives* and Kavlovsky-Vary's Crystal Globe winner Agustí Vila's *La mosquitera*/The Mosquito Net.
 - 7 See <http://leymemoria.mjusticia.es/> [accessed 8 September 2010].
 - 8 For further details on the legislation initiated by the Kirchners, as well as earlier measures such as the 1994 Ley Nacional de Reparación Económica [National Law of Economic Reparation], the problematic Ley de Punto Final (1986) and the Ley de Obediencia Debida [Full Stop and Due Obedience Laws] (1987), see Feitlowitz (2011: 299–366).
 - 9 I proffer a reading of the film through historical memory in Delgado (2010b). This chapter draws on my earlier review of *The Headless Woman* (see Delgado 2010a).
 - 10 For further details on the scandal surrounding the trafficking of children stolen from Spanish hospitals and reallocated to 'approved' Catholic families between 1940 and 1990, see Navarro (2008) and Fopiani (2011). Currently there are 900 such cases under investigation, with lawyers claiming that the total could reach 30,000 (Adler 2011). On the sequestration of the children of Republican prisoners in the aftermath of the Civil War, see Preston (2012: 513–14).
 - 11 *El Deseo* offered a 25 per cent investment in the film, which also benefited from French (25 per cent) and Italian (10 per cent) co-producers.
 - 12 Hostile criticisms of the film were published by Carlos Boyero and Borja Hermoso (both 2009). Almodóvar responded to the tone of the reviews in a number of outlets, including his blog (2009b), and the spat attracted substantial press attention.
 - 13 Although it is not clear whether the failure to take responsibility is a wider characteristic shared by her social circle and its obsession with drawn-out leisure activities – hunting, banal gossiping and shopping.
 - 14 Vero's family surname is Berardo – a name of Portuguese origin. For further details on the Italian influence in Argentina, see Devoto (2006).
 - 15 This was of course, the subject of Argentina's first Oscar-winning film, Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial*/The Official Story (1984), and remains a sensitive political issue in Argentina. Marcela Noble Herrera and her brother Felipe, heirs to the *Clarín* media group, underwent DNA testing in 2010 to determine whether they were forcibly taken from their parents and handed over to their wealthy, politically compliant mother Ernestina Herrera de Noble. The case attracted considerable media attention because both children were opposed to what they viewed as the state's infringements

- of their human rights; it pitted the powerful Herrera family against Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Spain has its own *niños desaparecidos*, discussed earlier in note 10.
- 16 Martel has spoken to me of disliking swimming pools, describing them as rancid, unclean spaces (Martel 2008).
 - 17 The jaundiced Candita is recovering from hepatitis – and Martel’s choice of this viral infection may well position her as a victim of contamination, ‘tainted’ by the culture of ‘disease’ that marks her conservative relatives. Her non-compliance and frankness, however, suggest that she (and perhaps by association her generation) may break with the culture of secrecy that defines these relatives.
 - 18 For further details on the history of the term and its appropriation by Perón, see Sosa (2009: 258, 261). Sosa provides a reading of the film using Judith Butler’s discussion of mourning in *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), and this chapter has benefited from my extensive discussions with Sosa on the dynamics of the film.
 - 19 See, for example, Anon. (2008); Felperin (2008); Boyero (2008). The film has also had vociferous champions, such as *Sight & Sound*’s Nick James and the *Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw (2010).
 - 20 And while it might be possible to craft an argument that sees the film as ideologically compromised by the ways in which it transforms a very specific national trauma for the international marketplace, I would argue that the film’s initial responses at Cannes precisely indicate the problems of assuming that the processes and politics of local meaning-making somehow do not come into play in the process of reading metaphors.
 - 21 Lala’s precise words are ‘Está llena la casa. Son espantos’ [The house is full. They’re dead].
 - 22 I am grateful to Margherita Laera for her assistance with research for this piece.

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