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LTNS 409

May 15, 2017

Stagnation and Apathy in the Pool Scenes of *La Ciénaga*

When films address a social or political issue it is typically overt; it is meant to be noticed immediately. This is not the case for Lucrecia Martel's 2001 film *La Ciénaga*. Martel's film focuses on two connected Argentinian families that refuse to look beyond the obvious and it is apparent in **mis-en-scène** and composition of the **sequences**. This paper will analyze two scenes, the opening pool **scene** and the pool scene where all the children are playing by the water, to unearth the latent message about Argentinian society following the dictatorship years.

Thematically, *La Ciénaga* centers on the decay of family life. The family is complacent and stagnant and as a result are unable to adapt to situations that necessitate action. Laura Podalsky describes it "as a film about what lies underneath the surface of daily life, about that which is not immediately visible and yet is nonetheless detectable."¹ There is an emphasis on willful apathy and ignorance as the family refuses to look at problems beneath the surface to fix the fracturing structure of their lives. Everyone is critically aware of the emotional disconnect developing between them but they do not act on it much in the same way that they do not act on their desires in the film.

¹ Podalsky, Laura. "Out of Depth: The Politics of Disaffected Youth and Contemporary Latin American Cinema."

Indeed, this is noticeable in the **mis-en-scène** of the two prominent pool **scenes**. In the opening pool **scene**, the dirty, stagnant water of the pool is prominently placed in the **frame**. There is no ignoring the fetid water that the adults lounge by. Along with this, there is very little movement from **shot** to **shot**, in fact the only person who moves significantly is Momi and her movement disturbs her sleeping family members. Even when Mecha falls, cutting herself on broken glass, the adults by the pool do not move much, and Momi is the only child to spring into action to aid her injured mother. The putrid water and sluggish people are early symbols for the willful apathy and stagnation of the family. In both cases, the water and Mecha's fall, something is wrong and yet there is a lack of action to remedy the situation. The second pool **scene** is very similar, the family lounges in bathing suits yet the pool is mostly untouched, leaves floating stationary on the top. The presence of the pool is a silent yet ignored reminder of the problems plaguing the family. The two **scenes** primarily contain a large number of people and the pool. The people in the **shots** are just as stationary as the pool; they lounge around staring off into the distance not talking to each other. Truly fascinating is the way Martel imparts the tension between family members in the construction of her **shots**.

The composition of the **shots** primarily imparts the emotional state of the family. All of the **frames**, in both **scenes**, are packed with people creating a claustrophobic feeling regardless of whether its indoors or outdoors. It's this claustrophobia that creates the general sense of anxiety and tension that surrounds the film. Opening **montage** of the film has a similar effect. It's a series of **shots**, of glasses, bodies, chairs, intercut with the opening credits **fading-in** and out with a ghostly water effect. Interestingly, it is reminiscent of a horror film. We get a sense that something is off but the tight **shots** and brief time they are on screen does not allow for enough time to absorb what is important in this **sequence**. As a result, the audience becomes

anxious and uncertain about what is to come, which establishes the overall tone of the film from the beginning. Another interesting **shot** is the **long shot** of all the people lounging by the pool after Mecha falls. The pool takes up almost half of the **frame** and the rest is occupied by Mecha's friends. What is interesting is the people are as stationary as the pool water even after the fall and obvious injury. Mecha's legs are just barely visible at the back behind the lounge chairs. The entire **shot** is condensed version of the message the film, that something is wrong just beyond the obvious and no one who could easily see and approach the issue ignore it. The second pool **scene** has an equal interesting **shot**. Right after Momi leaps into the pool, there is a **shot** of her family standing by the water's edge looking down in disbelief. In this **shot**, we see that Momi is metaphorically the only family member willing to look beneath the surface. The others are unwilling to look past the obvious dirtiness of the present issues to see the more complex problems festering beneath.

While *La Ciénaga* might seem like a rather boring family drama on the surface, much like its overall theme, it hides the true meaning of its narrative behind a decaying family. The entire film is an analogy for the inability of Argentina to properly address the social problems that were present after the pain of the Dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the problems with class division, as portrayed by the two indigenous maids hired by the family. Indeed, while discussing The Mothers, a radical protest group formed by mothers of disappeared individuals, Marguerite Guzman Bouvard notes, "Revolutionizing and socializing maternity is a powerful political concept; it threatens the very basis of the Argentine state and its oligarchic foundations, its reliance on the military, and its perpetuation of class divisions."² Martel is criticizing those Argentine middleclass who pretended that there were no problems with

² Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman. "Socializing Maternity." In Revolutionizing Motherhood. Scholarly Resources, 1994.

Argentine government, despite it being glaringly obvious. *La Ciénaga* is her reflecting Argentina in a mirror and asking it to look at itself instead of being apathetic.

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