

Martel's Aquatic Zoopoetics

Lucy Bollington

In his monograph *Formas comunes: animalidad, cultura, biopolítica*, Argentine animal theorist Gabriel Giorgi suggests that a change is underway in the deployment of the nonhuman animal figure within Latin American literature and installation art. Whereas historically, Giorgi contends, the animal functioned as a separate sign that denoted barbarity, different categories of alterity, and the “failure” of civilization, from the 1960s onwards there has been an increasing “destabilisation of the distance [...] holding apart the human and the animal,” with cultural texts frequently articulating a “new proximity” between the two “that is at once an area of ethical interrogation and a horizon of politicisation.”¹ In the contemporary period, the figure of the animal erupts into the internal spaces “of the home, prisons and cities,” writes Giorgi, and is often bound up with intimate explorations of the body, with its “desires, illnesses, passions and affects.”² Giorgi charges that this human-nonhuman entanglement calls into question existing ontological definitions of the “human” and often challenges the destructive biopolitics that posit certain lives as more liveable than others.³

Internationally-acclaimed New Argentine Cinema director Lucrecia Martel stages such a coming home of the animal, in the sense meant by Giorgi. Animals proliferate in and around the domestic spaces Martel frames, provoke significant multifurcations in narrative meaning, and appear in relation to the movements, characteristics, affects and sociopolitical status of a variety of human bodies. Martel's rich zoopoetical imaginary has attracted critical attention previously, particularly in relation to the ways in which the animals the director frames enter into symbolic exchange with her child and adolescent protagonists. For example, in her wider discussion of animal figures within contemporary Southern Cone culture, Valeria de los Ríos comments on the parallels between the cow and the small child Luciano near to the beginning of *La ciénaga*, observing that “the cow trapped in the swamp [...that...] suffers the shots of the band of armed children, is a metaphorized synecdoche of

the film since Luciano [...] is at the centre of the frame and in the line of fire at the moment the shot goes off.”⁴ Along similar lines, Sarah O’Brien maps a dialectic of cruelty and vulnerability that sutures children together with animals in Martel’s *Salta* trilogy, pointing to the ways in which the cow in *La ciénaga* and the dog in *La mujer sin cabeza* are “proxies for the human children who bear the brunt of the adult characters’ destructive negligence”, and averring that “these animals are allegorical stand-ins for the powerless who fall in the path of those bent on blotting out the past” more broadly.⁵

In what follows, I place emphasis on a specific animal figure—the fish—in Martel’s cinema. I shall first discuss the presence of fish along the outer-edges of Martel’s first feature-length film, *La ciénaga* (2001), examining their subtle expropriative function through a comparison with another animal (the imagined rat-dog), before analysing the fish-bowl effect that the film constructs through its specular processes. Next, I shall turn to *Pescados* (2010) and suggest that this playful, neo-surrealistic short functions as a paradigmatic model that condenses many of the sonic and visual processes at work in the director’s broader body of work. Finally, I shall end by offering some brief reflections on Martel’s recent historical film, *Zama* (2017), pointing to the elevation of fish as the major allegorical figure for the film’s delirious narrative, and evoking the ways in which the fish of *Zama* are redolent of the racialised dynamics that surround the fish of *La ciénaga*. Fish have not yet received the discussion afforded to terrestrial animals within major theoretical engagements with nonhuman animals.⁶ However, in Martel’s cinema they occupy a privileged space. Whilst a number of different animals come into contact with bodies of water in Martel’s films, fish provide the most significant example of an animal conjoined with aquatic space, and as such they draw into contact the meanings embedded in two major layers of Martel’s filmmaking: the zoopoetical and the aquatic. Fish—and fish tanks and liquid spaces more broadly—are imbued with the biopolitical and affective meanings that are commonly affixed to animals in Martel’s work, and they are also closely tied to Martel’s self-reflexive explorations of ocular frameworks. In bridging these layers, fish additionally bring into focus a fundamental similarity between the animal and the aquatic: namely, that both are implicated in formal and symbolic processes of contagion and uncertainty that take place in environments marked by profound anxieties about property coupled with an ongoing probing of the human. Though Martel’s cinema does not quite foreground a post-anthropocentric perspective—despite occasional convergences between the camera and nonhuman viewpoints—her work makes use of animals in general and spatialities related to the fish in particular to produce dehumanisations that consistently

place exclusionary human communities, forms of ownership, and supposed characteristics under close scrutiny.

Expropriative Animals

Fish have a minor yet prescient role in *La ciénaga*: they appear as catch following a sequence in which the children of the film go fishing with the aid of large knives (Figure 1). This sequence provides one example of the frequent dangerous and unsupervised forms of play that the children engage in whilst the adults remain swamped, drunk and inert in the deteriorating family property that functions as the film's primary spatiality. The children are accompanied in this fishing sequence by a local indigenous boy nicknamed *Perro* and, somewhat reluctantly, by Isabel, the indigenous maid employed by the film's main family who is also the girlfriend of *El perro*. After their aquatic fishing adventure, the children return home and *Perro* hands the catch to Joaquín, the rough and racist son of the main family, so that he can take them home for his family to consume. As Joaquín walks away, however, he discards the fish on the side of the road, remarking on their dirtiness and dismissing them as food for "Indians"—a gesture that ties into a wider anxious fixation on cleanliness (or lack thereof) in the film, a preoccupation that is inflected with racist undertones. Witnessing Joaquín's trashing of the fish, Isabel picks them up and, unbeknownst to her employers, prepares them in a stew for the family's dinner. This meal is consumed and enjoyed, and Joaquín in particular comments on its deliciousness.



Figure 1: Still from *La ciénaga* (dir. Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2001).

The fish thus provide an instance of the unanticipated incorporation of an animal into the family home. In this way, the example of the fish echoes and enforces the dynamics that are present in the main zoopoetical story of the film—that of the African rat—which I shall turn to momentarily. The fish sequence also gains wider significance when the film's central concerns about property are taken into account. These worries are articulated, first of all, through the framing of the decaying family home and its inhabitants: the architectural structure of the house is in a state of decline and disrepair, and this spatial decay finds a parallel in the scarred and wounded bodies of many of the human figures screened.⁷ As well as their injuries, these characters are commonly marked by a pronounced sense of lethargy. Indeed, the family spends most of the film lying down. As Jacques Derrida has noted, the erect posture is one of the properties that demarcates the line that separates humans from nonhuman animals within philosophical thought.⁸ In this vein, inscribed in the film's embodied horizontality is a sense of the broader decline of the human that is thematised throughout. The fish serve to further probe the borders of spaces and bodies, entering the house in a way that underscores the family's lack of control over what they possess (first their bodies, second their home). The consumption of the fish also carries racial inflections, for it speaks to the family's inability to detach themselves from that which they have rejected as indigenous.

As mentioned, the story of the African rat repeats in a more explicit way the dynamics of the fish example, and as such I should like to address this different animal in order to provide a comparison that speaks to the broader expropriative force of animals in *La ciénaga*. This common Latin American household story, which Vero narrates to her siblings and young cousins, concerns an abandoned dog that a nameless girl takes into her family home only to discover one day that the dog has consumed her pet cats. The animal's abnormal number of teeth and the animal autopsy that the vet performs confirm, ultimately, that this creature was not in fact a dog but an African rat taken into the home only to infect and disturb it. The youngest of Vero's cousins, a boy named Luciano, is fascinated by this story. Along with his sisters, he frequently announces his suspicions about hybrid rat-dog creatures living in and around the family homes in the Salta province of Argentina, where Martel's film is set. Luciano also finds himself repeatedly likened to the rat-dog creature by his siblings and cousins, and the unusual number of teeth that Luciano possesses furthers this comparison. The final consequence of Luciano's enthrallment with the rat-dog occurs in relation to the dog that barks beyond the garden wall that separates Luciano's family home from his neighbour's home. Luciano and

his sisters suspect that this barking animal is not really a dog but an abnormally large African rat. Near to the end of the film, Luciano climbs the staircase that lies against the garden wall in attempt to spy over it so as to finally perceive this imagined creature. Before he is able to do so, he falls to his tragic death, in the final fall of the film. The animal beyond the garden wall is neither seen by spectators nor by Luciano. It only exists in the soundscape.

Jonathan Burt has reflected that in cultural portrayals across history rats have frequently figured as the “twin of the human,” and have prompted concerns about a debased and degenerated alternative evolutionary, or rather devolutionary, pathway.⁹ The wall that separates Luciano from the imagined creature also carries significance in depictions of the rat, as enshrined in H.P. Lovecraft’s 1923 short horror story, “The Rats in the Wall,” the story Burt discusses at the start of his book. In Lovecraft’s story, the incessant sounds of rats prompt a curiosity and an investigation, and the wall is peeled back to reveal a subterranean graveyard replete with decay, rubble, ruin and remains. The man’s subterranean descent in this story is paralleled by his movement away from the properties associated with the human, most notably language. While the wall is ultimately retained in Martel’s film, *La ciénaga* nevertheless resonates with a Lovecraftian sense of the underlying decay or expropriative force lying within the crevices of built structures. Animals, in the form of the fish and the African rat-dog, are central to this destabilisation.

Fish in *La ciénaga* also have a broader symbolic function that relates to Martel’s distinctive use of the frame. At a number of junctures, the human characters of *La ciénaga* are filmed behind windows strewn with water, yielding the impression that they are contained within an aquarium. This is apparent, for instance, in the sequence in which Vero and her siblings go shopping. These children close the glass door of the shop behind them after running away from a group of boys who chase them, and after they do so, the boys throw a waterbomb at this window, which breaks against and runs down the glass. Vero presses her mouth against the glass and opens and closes her lips repeatedly in a gesture that is strongly reminiscent of the movement of a fish mouth on the surface of the water (Figure 2). Moments such as this create a convergence between the human, aquatic animals and the spectatorial frame, a confluence that produces a fish-bowl effect that acts as a metaphor for the claustrophobia and entrapment of the film’s domestic spaces and the cyclical movements of the human characters within these homes, for central to the film’s narrative is the sense that these figures seem fated to repeat that which has come before them.¹⁰ In interview, Martel has acknowledged that

the fish tank is an apt image through which to describe the “atmosphere of her films,” adding that “in real life we live immersed in an elastic fluid, it might be water but also air. We usually forget that we are immersed in air.”¹¹ This relation between water, fish, and Martel’s cinematic processes is central to *Pescados*, the short I shall discuss next.



Figure 2: Still from *La ciénaga*.

Anthropomorphised Dreaming

Pescados offers an extended glance at the animal, framing a school of carp as they move across the surface of a pond for around four minutes. The short foregrounds an exchange of gazes between the human and the non-human: the refracted image of the camera peering down at the pond is seen in glimpses as the bodies of the fish depart from and move into the frame, intermittently revealing and concealing the camera’s reflection. This interchange is filtered through an oneiric frame, as the form of collective dreaming that cinema has long been associated with is displaced onto the collective dream of a school of carp and unfolds in the subterranean space of the water. The fish dream something inescapably cinematic in that it resembles a prior filmic narrative about a road accident and a dog, a narrative that chimes closely with the main symbols and figures of Martel’s second feature-length film, *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008), for viewers familiar with Martel’s work. In this meandering slippage between cinema and pond, the pond becomes both a metaphorical image of the space of the auditorium and the screen, and speaks to the porousness of the two. In her book on Martel, Deborah Martin charts this implication, writing evocatively about how *Pescados* restores “the visual as a form of contact” in a

manner that resonates with Martel's broader work.¹² In this vein, Martel's comical short can be read as something of a microcosmic model for Martel's cinema, due to the ways it condenses and refracts major visual and sonic process at play across the director's work.



Figure 3: Still from *Pescados* (dir. Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, 2010)

The image of dreaming carp in *Pescados* is striking, first of all, because the unconscious is one of the properties that has separated human and nonhuman animals in philosophical discourse. Jean Baudrillard states it plainly: “animals have no unconscious [...] without a doubt, they dream, but this is a conjecture of a bioelectrical order, and they lack language, which alone gives meaning to the dream by inscribing it in the symbolic order [...] animals are not intelligible to us either under the regime of consciousnesses or under that of the unconscious.”¹³ If this perception relates to animals in general, fish would provide an extreme example of this contention, given how they are commonly associated in culture with aimlessness, decoration, disposability and the antimnemonic. While animals have been denied an unconscious, however, they have long been present in metaphors or proverbs that aid the theoretical explanation of the human unconscious. In *Electric Animal*, Akira Lippit calls attention to the animal metaphors that are present in Sigmund Freud's writing on the unconscious and dreams, noting that it is in “the form of an animal proverb that Freud configures the secret of dreams.”¹⁴ Lippit is referring specifically to Freud's statement in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “what do geese dream of? Of Maize,” an animal proverb within which Freud argues the entire theory of dreams as wish-fulfillments

is contained.¹⁵ Pursuing the use of this animal metaphor, Lippit continues that “If, as Freud believes, the origins of dream wishes are revealed in regression, then the recourse to animality here suggests a point of contact between the deepest recesses of memory and the animal world.”¹⁶

On first glance, this perception would appear strange in relation to *Pescados*, given the mentioned (and somewhat undeserved) reputation fish have for extreme forgetfulness. Yet this paradoxical intersection of dreamwork, mnemonic recesses and failed recall is entirely appropriate as a descriptor for Martel’s cinema, given that forgetfulness, willful or otherwise, reverberates across her feature films. This is particularly true of *La mujer sin cabeza* in which layers of forgetting are at work. In this film, the initial breakdown experienced by the protagonist Vero following her car crash is related to broader issues of class complicity, denial and guilt that occur in relation to Argentina’s recent dictatorship and post-dictatorship history, as Cecilia Sosa has discussed.¹⁷ This layered forgetting is also expressed in *La mujer sin cabeza* through the specular fish bowl effect that I explained in relation to *La ciénaga*, for the human characters of the film are constantly shot through wet screens. As Sosa puts it, Vero’s “sense of disconnection in relation to the family bonds, so characteristic of Martel’s films, is embodied by this blonde creature who wanders through her routines with an odd smile as if she were trapped inside a fish tank. Or better, as if the world itself has bubbled into a fish tank.”¹⁸ A process of dehumanisation, announced through the figure of the fish and its drifting, is thus enacted in *La mujer sin cabeza* in a manner that chimes with the uncertain gaze of the fish that Martel frames in *Pescados*.

Prior to turning to the question of this animal gaze, though, it is worth noting briefly that dreamscapes have been elevated, away from the Freudian model, as important terrains of human-nonhuman relationality in recent posthumanist theory. As Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn put it somewhat bluntly, in their own work and that of Kaja Silverman “dreaming does not involve the Freudian generation of arbitrary associations, pointing ultimately and only inward to an individual human subject in need of cure. Rather, dream associations are a way of finding resonances with all the other beings beyond us, beings with whom we share the fact of finitude, in ways that take us beyond our limits.”¹⁹ This is seen as an “ethical, or even political, practice in a world that spans beyond the human.”²⁰ Whilst Martel’s *Pescados* evokes a playful human-nonhuman encounter in the space of a dream, her film does not subscribe to this fully-fledged ethics beyond the human. It lingers instead in a space of partial exchange, in which fish are anthropomorphised and the spectator is asked to follow and observe the animal gaze and to associate it with the cinematic screen.

As such, *Pescados* resonates with further aspects of Lippit's thesis on cinematic animals. Seizing on John Berger's seminal essay concerning the fading of animal life from daily existence, Lippit argues that cinema emerged in conjunction with this event and offered a modern counterforce, recuperating and perpetuating the vanishing figure of the animal. To this effect, Lippit writes that "technology becomes a subject when it gains an unconscious; that artificial unconscious is established by the incorporation of vanishing animals,"²¹ and presents the case that "from animal to animation, figure to force, poor ontology to pure energy, cinema may be the technological metaphor that configures mimetically, magnetically, the other world of the animal."²² *Pescados* is characterised by the ambiguous relation to death and life that Lippit envisions. Under Sophie Mayer's interpretation of the short, "the fish are [...] devolved reincarnations of those who died in a road accident, given a second chance at emerging from the watery acousmatic space of Martel's cinema"²³—in other words, *Pescados* carries the implication of a spectral reappearance. Moreover, the fish occupy a liminal space in relation to singularity and multiplicity in the short, echoing the initial ambiguity inscribed into the very noun "fish". Even as the fish are given "words" through the electronic soundtrack, the shifting and fluid relationship between sound, voice, and animal figure in Martel's short is reminiscent of Lippit's sense of the ways animals function through "transference," a notion denoting "the rapid movement of affect from one entity to another."²⁴ Whilst Lippit's thesis on animal affect has been importantly problematised in scholarship, particularly by critics writing from a biopolitical perspective,²⁵ *Pescados* operates playfully in the space of affective convergence between cinema and animality that Lippit imagined, thus signalling the ongoing relevance of his framework.

The pond in which the fish dream also relates to wider tendencies in Martel's work. In interviews and workshops,²⁶ Martel has posited a correspondence between the rectangular swimming pool and the cinematic screen and highlighted the ways that the pool functions as a model for the experience of the spectator. The connection between cinematic dreaming and liquidity articulated in *Pescados* extends this metaphor towards the pond. With particular reference to *La niña santa*, Mayer has emphasised the haptic importance of the pool and the ways bodies of water serve to distort the aural and visual fabrics of Martel's cinema, advancing the claim that Martel's films "stand as a swamp, or its parallel the polluted swimming pool."²⁷ One quotation Mayer incorporates to illustrate her argument is taken from the following interview between Martel and Chris Wisniewski:

I don't like swimming pools, because I have the feeling that they are always dirty, like an infection. At the same time, in Argentina, there are not many public swimming pools, so I

think that the idea of having a cube of water just for a few people is like having a slave—to think that all of this water belongs to you as your property.²⁸

In this statement, Martel places the idea of contagion in connection with the notion of property that I discussed in relation to *La ciénaga*. As Mayer notes, the animals Martel places near swimming pools announce this threat of infection,²⁹ much as they do in the case of domestic space. This is exemplified by the hint of zoonosis that is introduced at the beginning of *La mujer sin cabeza* through the mention of the “invasive” turtles—animals Martel has noted to be unexpectedly aggressive³⁰—that encroach upon a private pool.

Pescados stages a contagion that functions on the levels of sight and sound. Superimposed with the rhythmical opening and closing of the mouths of the fish are a range of words and electronic noises, assembled by Argentine electronic musician Juana Molina. Amongst other words, can be discerned the phrases “no lo vi, no lo vi,” which at times metamorphose into “yo lo vi, yo lo vi,” translating as “I didn’t see it, I didn’t see it” and “I saw it, I saw it.” As well as playing with the linguistic divide that has served philosophically to divide humans and animals,³¹ these particular phrases thematise an uncertainty within the animal gaze and evoke an instability regarding precisely what can be drawn from it. Here, Martel plays on a long historical tendency to render the animal gaze as somewhat inaccessible.

The indeterminacy that animates *Pescados* is characteristic of Martel’s deployment of animals across her *oeuvre*. Animal images or sounds often feature in Martel’s cinema in a manner that bifurcates or confuses the spectator’s gaze—polluting, as it were, a clear interpretive reading of events. Animals, in this sense, extend what Joanna Page has identified as the “disorientation” and uncertainty that is created in the mind of spectators through Martel’s deliberate use of “loosened” plots.³² This is seen from Martel’s first short, *Rey muerto* (1995), onwards. In this short, which is shot in Salta and takes the form of a Western, a woman named Juana seeks to escape with her children from her violent husband. The film ends with Juana’s husband tracking her down on the side of a dusty road. Juana points a gun at him, warning him to stay back, but he comes towards her nevertheless and a struggle ensues. The struggle is barred from view, but spectators hear a range of noises, chief amongst them the screeching of birds. When we regain our sight, Juana’s husband has lost his—he is clutching his bloody eye-sockets in an episode that functions as a visual homage to another pioneer of cinematic sound, Alfred Hitchcock (and, specifically, *The Birds*). We do not see the birds attack, so we have no visual confirmation that this is what caused the mutilation of the eyes, yet the soundtrack creates an

ambiguity that implies the possibility of an animal attack, or at least places the attack in metaphorical relation to the sound of the birds. These implications are preserved in light of the fact that the man's wounds do not quite seem to add up to what one would expect from a gunshot at such close range (and given that this gunshot was not actually screened).³³ Another example of interpretive bifurcation occurs in *La mujer sin cabeza*, where the sound of a barking dog is set against the image of a fallen man. This confluence provides the catalyst that leads Vero to announce her suspicion that she hit a human rather than an animal on the road. When discussing *La mujer sin cabeza* in interview, Martel has fastened the animal gaze directly to her camera, writing that "I like to think that the camera is actually somebody who is physically there, like a creature, and it's somebody who is very curious, with no moral judgment."³⁴ The perspective of the animal, *the creature*, thus tempers and undercuts links between ocular structures and human morality at the same time as it introduces important narratological and thematic ambiguity.

Colonial Mimicry

Fish appear once again in Martel's most recent film, *Zama*. Based on a 1956 novel penned by Argentine author Antonio di Benedetto, Martel's *Zama* follows the increasingly delirious pursuits of a colonial bureaucrat named Don Diego de Zama in the 1790s in and around Asunción, now the capital of Paraguay. In accessing this space, both the novel and the film return to, and destabilise, an historical moment in which the animal frequently figured as "an absolute other of the human," as Giorgi puts it, a time in which the animal was considered a "menacing presence" that "the fragile civilisations of the region could hardly—when they could—contain," and was tied to ideas of "a constitutive failure (on a cultural, racial or historical level)."³⁵ Expanding on the slippage between human and nonhuman animal that is written into Di Benedetto's original text, which belies any attempt at ontological separation, Martel's camera is keenly attuned to Zama's relationship to nonhuman figures. Fish emerge, in the first instance, as the animal figure through which these symbolic intersections are filtered.

Fish feature in an anecdote or a caution placed at the start of *Zama*. Below, I quote from the original novel, but Martel's film remains faithful to the spirit of these lines:

[...] in this very river there lives a fish that the river spurns, and the fish must spend its life going to and fro like the monkey, though with greater difficulty, for the fish is alive and must wage continual battle against the ebb and flow that seek to cast it upon dry land. And these long-suffering fish [...]—so attached, perhaps despite themselves, to the very element that repudiates them—must devote nearly all their energies to the conquest of remaining in place, and though they are always in danger of being cast from the river's bosom, so much so that

they are never to be found in the middle of the current but always and only along the banks, the span of their life is long, longer than that of other fish. Only when their effort exhausts them to the point that they can no longer seek food do they succumb [...]”³⁶

As Martel’s film deploys the ideas embedded in this textual passage, the camera is initially placed in an interrogation room in which a bound indigenous man is being asked for a confession. After he is released, the man collapses and, out of the frame, he begins to relate lines from the fish anecdote quoted above. After the title of the film flashes onto the screen, spectators hear further lines. In the next shot, the camera is submerged in a current of water, surrounded by fish, and assumes an entangled perspective that collapses, albeit briefly, the distance between the human gaze and the animal presence, thus hinting towards a post-anthropocentric vision. Ultimately, though, the film marshals the story of the fish as an allegory for the human narrative of coloniality as embodied in the energies and travails of Zama. Indeed, the story of the fish foreshadows the increasing pointlessness of Zama’s deferred and frantic movements, as well as his various sexual, existential and financial conflicts and struggles. As the film unfolds, repeated visual and dialogical references are made to rivers and fish, reminding spectators of this original frame. This is seen, for example, in the conversation that occurs between Zama, the man named “El Oriental” and Luciana, and it is also evoked at the film’s end, when Zama, half dead, is towed across a river. If the privileged characters of Martel’s *La ciénaga* and *La mujer sin cabeza* are trapped in claustrophobic fish bowls of repetitive domesticity and amnesia, Zama is caught in the frenzied “currents” of colonial endeavour replete with their ambivalent and highly problematic desires and productions of power.

To bring this article to a close, I want to point to the ways the introduction of fish at another juncture in *Zama* echoes the fishing example I discussed in relation to *La ciénaga*. Central to this parallel between Martel’s first and most recent feature films is a sequence in which Zama approaches an indigenous woman named Emilia as she guts fish. Zama asks Emilia about a young child that crawls across the ground amidst the fish carcasses—the latent suggestion, which is later confirmed, being that he fathered this boy with Emilia. He enquires as to whether the child has developed certain human properties (namely, language and the ability to walk on two legs). As in *La ciénaga*, here fish function as connectors linking Martel’s white protagonists and indigenous characters. The implicit zoopolitical confluence between animality and indigeneity that occurs under the sign of the fish is evoked through a racist perspective (in this case, Zama’s viewpoint). Indeed, spectators are informed at the start of the film about Zama’s racism—his “triumph” as someone who has quelled indigenous rebellions in the

past, and his professed preference for white women (a preference that is contradicted by the voyeuristic movement of his gaze and by his actions). After being handed some fish, Zama leaves, but throughout the next sequence the fish linger in the background of the image, remaining present but hardly noticeable.³⁷ The fish stay in the backdrop during a period of dialogue between Zama and other colonial officials, and they accompany Zama's movement between different spaces (carried by another functionary). Unexpectedly, the spectator's gaze is then summoned back towards the fish suddenly when they are snatched by an indigenous man who runs across the back of the frame. Whilst in *La ciénaga* fish resurface unexpectedly in the form of a family meal, in *Zama* fish are therefore a "deferred" visual sign, tarrying in the background before reappearing as untimely reminders of the undercurrent of desire they invoke. Spectators are again prompted to recall fish's role as a symbol for Zama's relationship with Emilia later in the film when, in the midst of a feverish dream and in the context of increasing destitution, a package of fish arrive in his quarters and Zama asks, deliriously, if they are a gift from Emilia, sent by her to help him (to which the reply is no, they are not gifts, they were purchased). Subtly, fish thus evoke the ambivalence that infuses Zama's colonial sense of what is "proper" in the terrain of desire.

Animal theorist Nicole Shukin has written evocatively about the ways in which animals mimic nation-building endeavours. She addresses the beaver in particular, as it appears in Canadian advertisements as a postcolonial icon. The beaver, as it is represented in such publications, serves to naturalise the Canadian nation and to neutralise the violent history of capitalism and power that went into its construction, and the genocides that occurred along the axes of race and species.³⁸ Mimicking the frenetic and suspended journey of the protagonist, and appearing as stand-ins for his sexual struggles, the fish of *Zama* serve not to neutralise or disavow the violence of coloniality that the protagonist is engaged in. Rather, they produce an unhinging that is simultaneously a questioning of coloniality and its professed repudiations and a probing of the human.

Conclusion

As I have discussed, fish occupy an expansive position within Martel's work. They carry racialised and (neo-)colonial inflections and they also take on affective, expropriative and bifurcating functions in relation to the major sonic and visual processes of Martel's filmmaking. Beyond the figure of the fish, spaces linked to the fish, including the fish tank, pond and river, are central to Martel's distinctive framing of human bodies at multiple junctures and these liquid spaces are also closely

intertwined with the director's ideas regarding spectatorship and the cinema. Finally, the positioning of the human behind panes of watery glass, and within or in relation to bodies of water contributes to the wider destabilisation of the category of the human that Martel's films recurrently explore, an interrogation that is undergirded with culturally and historically specific questions relating to race, community, responsibility and memory in the wake of colonial, dictatorial and more recent structures of violence and marginalisation.

Lucy Bollington is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London. She completed her AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Cambridge. Lucy specialises in Latin American cultural studies and comparative visual studies, and her current research focuses on cultural confrontations with death, conflict and posthumanism. Her articles have been published in the *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* and the *Bulletin of Spanish Visual Studies*, and she is contributing co-editor (with Paul Merchant) of the forthcoming volume *The Limits of the Human in Latin American Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2020).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John David Rhodes, Lucrecia Martel and the other speakers at the Cambridge Martel symposium—Rosalind Galt, Catherine Grant and Deborah Martin—for stimulating discussions about Martel's cinema. I am also grateful to Laura McMahon and Georgina Evans for sharing their work on fish and aquatic animals with me during the preparation of this article.

Notes

- ¹ Gabriel Giorgi, *Formas comunes: animalidad, cultura, biopolítica* (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia 2014), loc. 67, Kindle. Unless otherwise indicated in the notes, all translations from Spanish into English are my own.
- ² Giorgi, loc. 56.
- ³ Giorgi, loc. 109.
- ⁴ Valeria de los Ríos, “Look(ing) at the Animals: The Presence of the Animal in Contemporary Southern Cone Cinema and in Carlos Busqued’s *Bajo este sol tremendo*,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 24, no.1 (2015): 35.
- ⁵ Sarah O’Brien, Sarah, “Sticky Matter: The Persistence of Animals as Allegory in Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga* and *La mujer sin cabeza*,” *Screen* 58, no.4 (2017): 464.
- ⁶ As Christopher Bear and Sally Eden remark, “the literature on ‘posthuman’ and animal geographies has focused upon warm-blooded animals, paying little attention to fish and aquatic environments.” Christopher Bear and Sally Eden, “Thinking Like a Fish? Engaging with Nonhuman Difference through Recreational Angling,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 336. This statement is echoed by Cary Wolfe, who notes a “terrestrial bias” in critical animal studies. Cary Wolfe, “Moving Forward, Kicking Back: The Animal Turn,” *Postmedieval* 2, no.1 (2011). Important exceptions include Laura McMahon’s essay “Film,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, eds. Ron Broglio, Undine Sellbach and Lynn Turner, 215-231 (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018) which examines the biopolitics of fishing in relation to the experimental documentary *Leviathan* (2012), and Georgina Evans’ forthcoming article “Framing Aquatic Life.”
- ⁷ See Jens Andermann, *New Argentine Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris), 79-80, for an evocative description of the relationship between cinematic time and the scarred body, and the different ways this relationship has been figured in existing criticism on *La ciénaga*.
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no.2 (2002): 405.
- ⁹ Jonathan Burt, *Rat* (London: Reaktion, 2004), Kindle, loc. 78.
- ¹⁰ Existing criticism has also emphasised the importance of human-liquid entanglements in Martel’s work. Deborah Martin, for instance, writes that “in Martel’s films, water is never far away. Intense humidity, heavy rainstorms, water fights, showering and washing, droplets on window-panes, all recur, as does the swimming pool,” and, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, Martin contends that Martel engenders a “liquidity of perception.” Deborah Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 106.
- ¹¹ Martel qtd. in Cecilia Sosa, “A Counter-Narrative of Argentine Mourning: *The Headless Woman* (2008), directed by Lucrecia Martel,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7-8 (2009): 260.
- ¹² Martin, *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, 114.
- ¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Shelia Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 138.
- ¹⁴ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Kindle, loc. 2456.
- ¹⁵ Lippit.
- ¹⁶ Lippit.
- ¹⁷ Sosa, “A Counter-Narrative of Argentine Mourning.”
- ¹⁸ Sosa, 253-254.
- ¹⁹ Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, “Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, no.1 (2015): 52.
- ²⁰ Stevenson and Kohn.
- ²¹ Lippit, *Electric Animal*, loc. 2850.
- ²² Lippit, loc. 2962.
- ²³ Sophie Mayer, “*Gutta cavat lapidem*: The Sonorous Politics of Lucrecia Martel’s Swimming Pools,” In *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*, eds. Christopher Brown and Pam Hirsch (London: Peter Lang, 2014), 201.
- ²⁴ Lippit, *Electric Animal*, loc. 2808.

²⁵ In her book, *Animal Capital*, Nicole Shukin advances an excellent critique of Lippit's work, noting how animal affect does not provide an opposition to the logics of biopolitics and capitalism. McMahon also problematises Lippit's reading of animal affect when analysing the biopolitics of *Leviathan*. Whilst *Pescados* invokes an affective vision of animality, Martel's other films often point to the connection between biopolitics and animality. For example, her commercial short film *Muta*, made for Mui Mui Prada, uses insect imagery when framing luxury fashion models in a manner that points to the connection between fashion advertisements and the animal image, thus underscoring how the animal sign is sutured to the forms of affect and biopower that structure the fashion industry. In Martel's *Salta* trilogy, the frequent connection woven between animal figures and structures of racial and class-based inequality also suggests something of the "zoopolitical" dimensions of modern biopower.

²⁶ I am referring here to the interviews and workshops that took place during Martel's 2018 residency at the University of Cambridge.

²⁷ Mayer, "Gutta cavat lapidem," 201.

²⁸ Martel qtd. in *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁹ Mayer, "Gutta cavat lapidem."

³⁰ In the Q&A following the screening of *La mujer sin cabeza* at the Arts Picturehouse in Cambridge (2018) Martel characterised the turtles in this way.

³¹ As Derrida puts it, "from Aristotle to Lacan, including Kant, Heidegger and Levinas, the same thing is said: 'the animal is without language.'" Derrida, "The Animal," 400.

³² Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 185.

³³ This provides an early example of Martel's experimentation with perception. As Page notes, Martel "repeatedly brings questions of perception to the fore by insisting on the failure or the excess of vision, sound, or touch." Page, 187.

³⁴ Amy Taubin, "Interview: Lucrecia Martel," *Film Comment*, July-August, 2009, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/shadow-of-a-doubt-lucrecia-martel-interviewed/>

³⁵ Giorgi, *Formas communes*, loc. 56.

³⁶ Antonio Di Benedetto, *Zama*, trans. Esther Allen (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2016), Kindle, 7-8.

³⁷ It is worth noting briefly that the fish's deprived position in relation to the frame relates to wider tendencies in Martel's filmmaking. In her reading of *La mujer sin cabeza*, for instance, Sosa comments on the ways Martel's use of focus is structured along hierarchical lines, writing that "the servants, the murky employees of the house [...] are kept firmly on the parameters of the image, that they are "shadowy figures that keep on going all around the house, carrying out orders, bringing plant pots, painting nails, cleaning bleeding animals, always in the background like buzzing insects", thereby standing in sharp contrast to the blonde figure of the protagonist. Sosa, "A Counter-Narrative of Argentine Mourning," 256.

³⁸ Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 3-5.