

## **A Tuberous Fetish: The Potato as Protagonist in Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada* (2009)**

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**Abstract:** Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada* (2009) has often been analysed in academic literature. Such discussions frequently focus on the film's central female character, Fausta, either as a means to critique the representation of indigenous Andean characters within the film, or to celebrate themes of female empowerment. In contrast, this paper provocatively suggests that a potato which Fausta inserts into her vagina is the true protagonist of the film. Drawing on the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Laura Marks it will be demonstrated that Fausta's potato is an unusual tripartite fetish: a commodity; a materialisation of psychical power; and an intercultural object imbued with agency. In this way, the article proposes that Llosa manipulates Peruvian cultural history in such a way that the film is rather more complex and ambiguous than it may at first appear.

**Keywords:** Claudia Llosa; *La teta asustada*; potato; commodity fetish; *vagina dentata*; intercultural fetish; indigenous beliefs in Peru

*Introduction:*

Claudia Llosa's *La teta asustada* [*The Milk of Sorrow*] (2009) is one of the most successful and famous Peruvian films of recent years. Its narrative is, by now, particularly well known. The film follows the character of Fausta, a Quechua speaker from the Andean region who has moved to the impoverished outskirts of Lima in the years following Peru's

devastating internal conflict. The title refers to the condition – as recorded by medical anthropologist Kimberly Theidon (2004: 76-78) – whereby Fausta’s mother, violently raped while pregnant, has passed her trauma to her daughter through bodily contact.<sup>1</sup> In the film’s opening scenes Fausta, whose soul has abandoned her body due to fear, accompanies her mother as she dies. She subsequently seeks employment to raise the money necessary to return her mother’s body to her home for burial. Fausta begins working as a domestic servant for Aída, a wealthy limeña musician of European origin, who promises to give Fausta pearls in exchange for the Quechua songs which recount her trauma. Having performed these melodies to an audience in the capital as if they were her own compositions, Aída betrays Fausta and refuses to give her the pearls. The film concludes with Fausta returning to Aída’s home to take the pearls she has been promised, and then entrusting her mother’s body to the ocean.

Upon its release, Llosa’s previous film, her debut feature *Madeinusa* (2006), was subject to particularly sharp criticism due to its depiction of indigenous life in the Andes (see, for example Pagán-Teitelbaum 2012). While *La teta asustada* was far more positively received, it too has proven controversial. More specifically, debate has centred on questions regarding the representation of Andean characters, the audience for whom it was produced, and the source of its funding (see, for example D’Argenio 2013; Paredes Dávila 2015: 62; Shaw 2016: 8-10). Nonetheless, the film has also received considerable praise within existing scholarship (see, for example Lambright 2016; Monette 2013), with the depiction of its female lead receiving specific commendation (see, for example Barrow 2013: 202). In contrast to these arguments, however, it is not my intention to focus primarily on the human characters in the *La teta asustada*. Indeed, I would argue that Fausta is not really a character at all, that her body is, in fact, an essentialised and empty vessel. Instead, I will propose that it

is a potato which is central to the film. Towards the start of the film Fausta collapses following her mother's death and is taken to a doctor who discovers that she has inserted a potato in her vagina. Subsequently, Fausta explains to her uncle that it is not a method of contraception as the doctor suspects, but that it is an implement to ward off violent rape as suffered by her mother. It is this potato which I suggest drives the plot within *La teta asustada*.

As Susan M. Block notes, in 'traditional, spiritual terms, a fetish is an object [...] believed to possess mystical energy' (2015: 396). For Laura Marks such fetish objects are especially important to intercultural cinema as, drawing on the work of William Pietz, she argues that they acquire agency and power through physical contact, and that they emerge through 'a long and complex history of colonization, appropriation, and translation' (2000: 86). As Marks specifically argues, 'Colonial power relations in particular, with their propensity for crossbreeding indigenous and imported meanings, are prime sites for the production of these objects' (2000: 89). With this in mind, I will draw on the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Marks to demonstrate that Fausta's potato is an unusual tripartite fetish; a commodity, a materialisation of psychical power, and an intercultural object imbued with agency. Indeed, by analysing the potato in this way, it will ultimately be revealed to be the protagonist of the film. This reading of the text undoubtedly echoes Llosa's own argument that the film is concerned with 'transculturation, how identities are in constant transformation, influenced by others and by their past and present' (cit. Barrow 2013: 208), and I will demonstrate that Llosa manipulates Peruvian cultural history in such a way that the film is rather more complex and ambiguous than it may at first appear.

*Pearls, Songs, and the Commodity Fetish:*

Prior to discussing the central role of the potato in *La teta asustada*, it is useful first to consider the pearls which Aída promises to give to Fausta in exchange for the songs which she sings to herself. Anne Lambright proffers two valuable observations which allow us to interpret this transaction. First, she proposes that this act serves as a repetition of early exchanges between Spanish settlers and the indigenous people of the Americas, and thus serves to tie the interchange between Fausta and Aída into this long history of colonial exploitation (Lambright 2016: 165). Thereafter, Lambright argues that Aída's performance of the compositions represents a new colonial act which also 'dramatiza los peligros de las búsquedas de testimonios que con frecuencia toman lugar en los procesos de justicia transicional' [dramatizes the dangers of the search for testimonies which frequently take place in processes of transitional justice] (2016: 165). As anthropologists Nathalie Koc-Menard and Dorothee Delacroix have argued, in post-conflict Peru the victims of the internal struggle have been obliged publicly to share their private memories, testimonies, wounds and humiliations in order to secure compassion and empathy from wider society or, indeed, to receive the support of government departments and NGOs (Delacroix 2014: 236; Koc-Menard 2014: 217). Similarly, the indigenous victims of the internal conflict have, at times, argued that their suffering has been exploited for the gains of others. As the Director of the Peruvian Comisión de Derechos Humanos [Commission of Human Rights, COMISEDH] has stated:

Me he encontrado en reuniones con personas que reclaman que las ONG y otras instituciones se vuelven millonarios con su sufrimiento. Creen que por hacer una película, un documental... se viaja, y se gana concursos... y la gente cree que nos hemos llenado de dinero... se imaginan miles de dólares y reclaman: 'Y nosotros seguimos igual y peor. En cambio ustedes... se llenan los bolsillos'. (cit. Koc-Menard 2014: 224)

[I have found myself in meetings with people who complain that the NGOs and other institutions become millionaires with their suffering. They believe that by making a film, a documentary... one travels, and one wins competitions... and the people believe that we have become rich... they imagine thousands of dollars and complain: 'And we carry on just the same and worse. But you... fill your pockets.']

It is essentially this process which Lambright finds at work in *La teta asustada*, claiming that 'Aída se ha aprovechado del sufrimiento de Fausta para su propio beneficio' [Aída has taken advantage of Fausta's suffering for her own benefit] (2016: 165). Nonetheless, I do believe that rather more can be said about the exchange. Gastón Lillo goes some way in this direction when he more specifically suggests that Aída's pearls stand as a material link with the very first exchanges between Columbus and the indigenous people of the Americas, in which he obtained their submission in exchange for a few inexpensive glass pearls (2011: 442). As Lillo intuits, then, pearls have a specific history which should be taken into account in order fully to understand these scenes. In addition, it is extremely important that, when Aída appropriates Fausta's songs, she retains only the melodies and the accompanying words are absent from the performance. The simple fact that Fausta's voice and testimony are stripped from the musical composition, that the stories which recount the horrific social reality which underpins their creation is completely discarded, requires further explanation.

It is noteworthy that when Marx describes commodity fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital*, pearls are one of the examples he provides of such a material asset (1982: 177). With this in mind, I would propose that, when critics such as Lillo and Lambright allude to the colonial history encapsulated in the exchange of pearls, they recognise these objects as commodity fetishes. While it is oft-invoked, it is perhaps useful at this stage to return to the root of Marx's description of the commodity fetish, that is, the tripartite description of value. Derived from their material qualities, the use-value of pearls is easily understood: inert,

durable, and considered beautiful, they have long been valued for use as adornment. Insofar as Aída then goes on to offer them to Fausta in a reciprocal transaction to obtain her songs, and that Fausta will use them in turn to return her mother's body to the Andes, we can also see how exchange-value homogenises commodities and becomes a measure of quantity rather than quality. Of course, to arrive at this quantity Marx proposes that value be understood as abstract labour time (for more on commodities and value, see Harvey 2010: 15-26; Marx 1982: 125-63). Thus, Marx urges us to 'remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, [and] that their objective character as values is therefore purely social' (1982: 138-39). Nonetheless, the 'mysterious character of the commodity-form', is simply that 'the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (Marx 1982: 164-65). As David Harvey succinctly summarises Marx's position, commodity fetishism is born of the fact that 'our social relation to the laboring activities of others is disguised in the relationships between things' under capitalism (2010: 39). In the case of *La teta asustada*, we learn absolutely nothing about the social relations which produced the pearls which Aída exchanges for Fausta's songs. Paradoxically, it is this very absence which highlights the fact that the social relations which produced Fausta's songs become obscured such that they, too, become commodity fetishes, just like the pearls for which they are exchanged.

The first question, then, is: what do we know of the history of pearls in the Americas? While the trade in pearls dates back to antiquity, the discovery and exploitation of pearl banks in South America by Spanish colonisers broke the monopoly of the Orient, and contributed tremendous profits to the crown in the early colonial period (Otte 1977: 21-22; Parsons 1980:

103). As Enrique Otte notes in his detailed history of the trade during this period, *Las perlas del caribe: Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua* (1977), pearls were first discovered in the Caribbean by Columbus leading to a boom in production from 1516. To sustain the industry, the first town in South America (Nuevo Cádiz on the island of Cubagua off the coast of present day Venezuela) was founded and rapidly expanded. Nonetheless, over-exploitation led to the complete collapse of the industry and the abandonment of the city by 1538 (Otte 1977: 34-35, 54, 62, 87). As Otte makes clear, the industry was both rapacious and brutal. Indeed, the horrendous fate suffered by the indigenous slaves captured and forced to dive for pearls drew the opprobrium and denunciation of none other than Bartolomé de las Casas. In a short chapter dedicated to the subject in *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las indias* [*An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*] (1542), Las Casas states categorically that:

The tyranny that the Spaniards exercise against the Indians in finding or diving for pearls is one of the most cruel and shameful things in the world. There is no hellish and hopeless life on this earth that may be compared with it, however hard and terrible taking out the gold in the mines may be. (2003: 62-63)

Las Casas then describes in some detail how the indigenous divers would succumb to pulmonary ailments and ‘generally die spitting blood from out their mouths’, or become prey for the sharks and barracudas that were native to the region (2003: 63). Both of these points are substantiated by Otte. Thus he notes that pulmonary complaints were just as common in pearl divers of the twentieth Century (although production had shifted elsewhere in the world), and he also highlights that an ordinance issued in 1537 banned the disposal of dead bodies in the sea due to the sheer number of indigenous divers who were being eaten by the sharks attracted by the cadavers (1977: 362). Of course, none of this history appears in *La*

*teta asustada*. Yet, this is precisely the point: in the film, pearls appear only as a simple commodity to be exchanged for Fausta's songs.

In Llosa's film the brutal social relations underpinning the production of pearls in the Americas have been entirely overcoded. Nonetheless, on the other side of the transaction, the viewer is entirely aware that Fausta's Quechua songs have emerged from the torture and rape of her parents. When the songs are performed by Aída, however, they are extracted from their context and stripped of their content such that they become commodities. As Marx notes, 'he who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values' (1982: 131). While previously the songs served as a memorial device, a vibrant link between Fausta and her parents, they now become an object of entertainment for the *limeño* elite. Thus the songs in the film not only acquire an exchange-value but they also become social use-values. Finally, the hidden colonial history of the pearl prefigures the commodity fetishization of Fausta's songs; words are erased and the traumatic social relations which produced the commodities are subsumed and presented as mere relations between things.

In a certain sense, then, Marie-Eve Monette is entirely correct when she asserts that 'Llosa observa la manera en que esta cultura [la cultura limeña] fuertemente asociada [...] al consumismo y al individualismo, afecta a los indígenas' [Llosa observes the way in which this culture (the culture of Lima) strongly associated with consumerism and individualism affects the indigenous population] (2013). As Deborah Shaw argues, however, 'while the film was taken as representative of Peruvian culture in the world', there was very little attention paid to the film's European funding context, or its intended global audience (2016: 8). Where



Shaw goes on to argue that the international audience can therefore ‘comfortably judge the ignorance of Fausta and the exploitative tactics of Señora Aída from the position of bourgeois cinephilia’ (2016: 9-10), I want to propose an alternative interpretation of the key exchange between Fausta and Aída. Specifically, I argue that Aída’s performance is a meta-textual and self-critical moment within which Llosa recognises that the Colonial process she wants to decry is unavoidably at play in her cinematic depiction of that same process. As Shaw rightly notes, *La teta asustada* was internationally funded and a global success, even chosen to represent Peru at the 2009 Academy Awards (2016: 8). Nonetheless, I would suggest that Llosa is acutely aware of the danger that she may provide this audience with a comfortable depiction of an exotic other. Thus she cinematically demonstrates how the suffering of the indigenous population of Peru can be overcoded and their voices unsentimentally silenced as their unique cultural productions undergo commodity fetishization. The moment is meta-textual in that it also reflects a process which is inevitably implicated in Llosa’s own attempts to represent Peruvian reality in cinematic form, precisely because the industry is always already capitalist and, arguably, Colonial. Ultimately, *La teta asustada* is a film acutely concerned, in its content as in its form, with the production of the commodity fetish. And it is possibly under this light that we should first consider the potato which Fausta inserts in her vagina.

### *The Potato as Commodity Fetish*

In introducing his exhaustive history of the pearl industry in Cubagua, Otte notes that the pearl ‘se forma por la introducción de un cuerpo extraño, un parásito, o un grano de arena, contra el cual el animal se protege por una secreción’ [is formed by the introduction of a foreign-body, a parasite or a grain of sand, against which the animal protects itself by way of

a secretion] (1977: 19-20). Clearly, the potato which Fausta inserts in her vagina in *La teta asustada* is also a foreign body against which Fausta's body struggles to protect itself. Moreover, by simply considering the use value of the seemingly humble potato or, indeed, the social relations and colonial history embedded in this seemingly ordinary foodstuff, it becomes clear that it could be considered the commodity fetish *par excellence*. Recent economic research has proposed that the introduction of the potato to Europe 'explains 25-26 percent of the increase in Old World population between 1700 and 1900 and 27-34 percent of the increase in urbanization' (Nunn and Qian 2011: 643). Moreover, in her excellent *Feeding the People: The Politics of the Potato* (2020), Rebecca Earle provides a detailed history of the potato's movement around the world, arguing that tracing peasant and elite attitudes towards the imported foodstuff provides a privileged perspective on the shifting relations between the State and the individual.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Earle dedicates an entire chapter to the nineteenth century development of capitalism arguing that, during this period, 'talking about potatoes was a way of making concrete the connections binding the lives of individual men and women to the spread of the market economy, and of expressing an opinion about its impact', a proposal that seemingly inverts Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, yet, I would suggest, demonstrates the very ways in which relations between people under capitalism come to be subsumed within specific commodities (2020: 141, 140-67).

While Earle is particularly attentive to the everyday practices of ordinary people and the unique local factors which affected the adoption of the potato as a foodstuff, the important point for my argument is that she also makes it absolutely clear that 'the potato travelled around the globe with the expansion of trade and colonial conquest', used variously as a means to demonstrate European superiority, to defend colonisation as a benevolent practice, and to exculpate colonial occupiers for disasters wrought by their own mismanagement while

transferring the blame to the colonised population (2020: 107, 107-39). This colonial exploitation of the potato can be seen as early as 1553, when Pedro Cieza de León reported the fact that many Spaniards enriched themselves by buying and transporting ‘*chuño*’, the traditional dried potato product of the Andes, to the Potosí silver mine to sell. This indigenous foodstuff thus became the fuel which drove the mine, utilized to exploit the ‘slave-workers [who] were maintained almost exclusively on *chuño*’ (Salaman 1985: 41). Ultimately, as Redcliffe Salaman notes in his book *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, the potato has proven to be ‘the most perfect instrument for the maintenance of poverty and degradation’ (1985: 602), as it has historically fulfilled ‘a twofold part: that of a nutritious food, and that of a weapon ready forged for the exploitation of a weaker group in a mixed society’ (1985: 600). For Salaman the Irish potato famine, itself the result of colonial exploitation, confirms the argument (1985: 289-316; see also Earle 2020: 155-57).

Much like Aída’s pearls, then, the potato that Fausta inserts into her vagina also stands as a commodity fetish that ties the film to a long history of colonial expansion and exploitation. This particular form of ruthless fetishism began first with Spaniards in the Americas, and was then spread throughout the world by various actors. Unlike films such as Alex Rivera’s *Papapapá* (1995), however, it is not my contention that *La teta asustada* is designed to uncover this particular history. Rather, I suggest that this is the necessary context for understanding the importance of the potato within the film. As Marks argues, ‘theories of fetishism describe how a value comes to inhere in objects that is not reducible to commodification’ and ‘[s]ome objects embody memory as well as labor’ (2000: 80). With this in mind, it is my argument that Llosa seeks to uncover and depict this embodied memory and that, in doing so, this tool of exploitation is ultimately endowed with agency. As a first step in this direction, it is useful to consider Maria Chiara D’Argenio’s argument that, within

*La teta asustada*, ‘the urban world is seen as rational and progressive, while the rural as traditional and backward’ as Fausta’s decision to insert a potato into her vagina is a fundamentally ‘irrational’ practice (2013: 25). While I recognise that the potato undoubtedly invokes certain traditional beliefs and practices, I contend that *for this very reason* it is also perfectly rational, as we shall now see.

*Castration Fear and the Vagina Dentata:*

In discussing *La teta asustada*, Gisela Cánepa-Koch notes ‘la falta de precisión etnográfica’ [the absence of ethnographic precision] in the filmic text (2009). I contend that this imprecision is derived from the fact that the film is deeply concerned with Colonial encounter and the intercultural fetishes that arise from this experience. Nowhere is this more clearly observed than in the depiction of the potato which Fausta inserts into her vagina. As noted, Fausta pursues this action specifically to protect herself from potential rapists. As she states ‘yo llevo esto como protector [...], como un escudo de guerra..., como un tapón, porque sólo el asco detiene a los asquerosos’ [I carry this as a protector, as a war shield, as a cap, a stopper, because only disgust, stops disgusting men]. As Shaw notes, Llosa grants the viewer a glimpse of this ‘exotic disgust’ when she juxtaposes Fausta’s beauty with shots of her cutting ‘the sprouts that grow and protrude from her vagina’ (2016: 7). I would suggest that it is important, however, to ponder *why* this scene generates this uncomfortable combination of attraction and repulsion. And I would suggest that it is because the potato functions as an unusual and inverted Freudian fetish.

Centred on male patients and their phallogentric sexual development, Freud’s early psychoanalytic description of the fetish proposes that it ‘is a substitute for the woman’s (the

mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not want to forego' (1950: 199). As Freud continues his analysis, he explains that the fetish represents a disavowal of the belief in the mother's castrated penis:

It is not true that the child emerges from his experience of seeing the female parts with an unchanged belief in the woman having a phallus. He retains this belief but he also gives it up [...]. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its successor, so to speak, and now absorbs all the interest which formerly belonged to the penis. But this interest undergoes yet another very strong reinforcement, because the horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute. [...] One can now see what the fetish achieves and how it is enabled to persist. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and safeguard against it. (1950: 200)

For Freud, then, the fetish object accrues its tremendous power, in part, from the fact it testifies to the boy's victory over potential castration, while simultaneously encapsulating and disavowing 'castration anxiety coupled with unconscious fear of the mother's genitals' (Block 2015: 397). When it is considered that, as Barbara Creed notes, 'Freud argued that the male child may mistake the mother's menstrual blood as that which issues from the wound caused by her castration' (1994: 112), a version of the child's triumph is clearly witnessed in the *La teta asustada*. While celebrating a family engagement, a young man makes an attempt to seduce Fausta with the words 'si el color rojo es el color de la pasión, bañame con tu menstruación' [if red is the colour of passion, bathe me in your menstruation]. Thus the boy overcomes the fear symbolically carried in menstrual blood, as it becomes a source of fascination and attraction rather than anxiety and fear. The introduction of menstrual fluid, however, serves another function. As noted above, the psychological associations connected with menstrual blood are inescapable and, in *La teta asustada* as elsewhere, it disavows persistent castration fear. As Creed argues, however, when the child first witnesses his mother's blood, 'he could just as easily mistake this blood for his father's' and he may go on to 'phantasize that the man who inserts his fragile penis into the mother's vagina is taking a great risk'

(1994: 112) and, as regards *La teta asustada*, this is the essential frame of reference for my argument. As Fausta trims the tuberous growths that emerge from her vagina, the clippings falling to the floor resemble nothing other than curved canine teeth pulled from a mouth, and thus the potato serves to create a new form of the *vagina dentata*.

Imagery of the *vagina dentata* is encountered in cultures throughout the world, including in pre-Columbian Peru (Hill 2015: 1235-36). As Jill Raitt notes, the '*vagina dentata* visualizes, for males, the fear of entry into the unknown' (1980: 416) and, for this reason, 'another visual motif associated with the *vagina dentata* is that of the barred and dangerous entrance' (Creed 1994: 107); a visual refrain also encountered throughout *La teta asustada*. The camera follows Fausta as she moves through the narrow passageways in a market and the viewer shares her fear and apprehension. The large wooden gate to Aída's home features frequently throughout the film, a solid blockade which denies entry to all but a select few glimpsed first through a small aperture. Fausta closes a gate on her would be seducer as a means of rejecting him and, at the film's conclusion, she travels through a dark tunnel hewn in desert rock as she transports her mother's body to its final burial place. Rather more important for our present analysis, however, is that the myth of the toothed-vagina plays on 'male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap' and posits 'woman as castrator' (Creed 1994: 106). From the outset, Llosa's film makes clear that during the internal conflict in Peru; the fear of castration was more than a mere anxiety. As Perpetua (Fausta's mother) reminds her daughter in song during the film's opening sequence, the men who came to rape her first castrated her husband, and made her consume his severed penis. Thus, when Fausta inserts the potato in her vagina, she takes an object that has served as a tool of colonial exploitation (the potato) and inverts the horrendous trauma suffered by her mother and father in order to transform it into an effective weapon against the very people

who may seek to harm her in the same way. And there is no doubt as to the efficacy of Fausta's strategy. As Valérie Robin Azevedo notes in her discussion of the testimony of a *rondero campesino* [a peasant self-defense volunteer] in Ayacucho, castration was a very real threat, a terrible wound inflicted on certain victims during the Peruvian conflict (2014: 257). Where others have suggested that the narrative of *La teta asustada* slowly reveals Fausta's empowerment (see, for example Beteta 2009b), I argue that, through the insertion of the potato in her vagina, Fausta already has considerable agency. Playing on traditional myths related to human sexual development, Fausta defends herself against the crimes suffered by her parents. However, as I'll go on to demonstrate, the potato is endowed with even greater significance than this, and also functions as a particularly powerful intercultural fetish.

#### *The Potato as Intercultural Fetish:*

If the potato first stood as a commodity fetish masking its own history of colonial exploitation, it now stands as a powerful object which turns the fears of Fausta's would-be oppressors against them in order to protect her. It is in this way that the fetish object first displays its agentic capacities. Unlike Marx's description of the commodity fetish, however, this product appears 'to be animated or life endowed precisely because [it seems] to embody the social milieu from which' it came, as in Michael Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (2010: 36). In this vein (and particularly because images of the *vagina dentata* have been encountered in pre-Columbian cultures) I now want to propose that the potato which transforms Fausta's vagina in this manner is an intercultural fetish. For Marks, 'intercultural cinema' primarily 'attempt[s] to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West' (2000: 1). One of the ways which Marks argues that

these diverse regimes of knowledge appear on the screen is through the emergence of fetish objects. As she explains, they are ‘the product not of a single culture’ but emerge from ‘the encounter between two’ or more cultures. In the same manner, I argue that when Fausta inserts a potato in her vagina, it too becomes a node ‘in which historical, cultural, and spiritual forces gather with a particular intensity [...], encoding the histories produced in intercultural traffic’ (2000: 89). In the first instance, the film is evocative of Marks’ argument, drawn from the work of Benjamin, that ‘the fetish object encodes truths of collective life, and these truths can be discovered only through a shock that reaches the unconscious’ (2000: 86). As we have seen, in *La teta asustada*, the potato produces a *vagina dentata* which causes a shock to the unconscious which is intimately connected with the horrors of the internal conflict in Peru, namely rape as a weapon of war and literal castration fear. In addition, however, the potato comes to represent several Andean myths simultaneously on the screen.

#### *The Potato as Pachacuti:*

In his examination of the history of the potato, Salaman reflects on the nature of certain pots produced by the pre-Incan *Moche* culture of coastal Peru which frequently feature representations of potatoes. Within this discussion, Salaman makes the proposition that:

If [...] we assume that the Indian regarded what we call an ‘eye’ [in a potato] as a ‘mouth’, then we see that all the common features of the tuber can be likened to those of a human being. The round tuber is the head, an elongated one the body, irregular outgrowths are limbs, the ‘eye’ becomes a mouth with well-defined lips, and the buds are teeth serrated like those of a tiger. (1985: 24)



Indeed, several of the examples provided by Salaman are particularly relevant to this analysis. First there is the image of a pot depicting the body of a woman created from potato tubers, then another within which the potato 'eyes' are arranged so that a human head contains a second, inverted face, and finally, there is an image of a potato tuber with numerous mouths including that of a jaguar. The first image is readily identified with Fausta. As the doctor reminds us at the start of the film, the tuber has continued to grow inside her and the new sprouts are entering her body such that she, too, is a strange hybrid of human and potato. The relevance of the second image is found in the simple fact that, as Fausta's potato converts her vagina into a mouth; her body also contains a second inverted potato-head. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that Erica Hill traces images of the *vagina dentata* in the ancient Andean world to the Chavín de Huántar archaeological site dating from 900-400 B.C.E. While Hill finds possible subsequent references to the *vagina dentata* in both the Paracas (900-400 C.E.) and Nasca (100 B.C.E.-650 C.E.) cultures of the southern coast of Peru, it is not something she references in either Moche (100-800 C.E.) or Inca (1438-1572) sexual imagery (2015: 1235-38). Through a series of imprecise associations, then, the potato inevitably condenses, confuses and crystallises encounters between several different cultures. Indeed, I argue that, when Salaman's third example is considered, this also connects Fausta and the potato to 'the notion of regular episodes of the cataclysmic destruction and recreation of the world [...] evoked in the Quechua term *pachacuti*, which refers to a "revolution, or turning over/round" (cuti) of "time and space" (pacha)' (Urton 1999: 41). Moreover, one can extend the symbolic relation further still and suggest that Fausta's monstrous body comes to reflect Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui's vision of the sun god which ultimately led to him becoming the ninth ruler of the Incas.

As the Spanish chronicler Bernabé Cobo records, when the sun god appeared to Pachacuti Inca he took the form of an indigenous man with shining rays springing from his head, with snakes ‘coiled around his arms at the shoulder joints’, and with ‘the head of a lion’ protruding between his legs (1979: 133-34). Importantly, this vision appeared to the Inca on the reflective surface of a crystal tablet. So, too, when Fausta goes to trim the sprouts protruding from her vagina, the scissors rest on a mirror which she uses to guide her work. In addition, the snakes coiled on the Inca’s shoulders are immediately evocative of the head of the medusa, which Creed notes ‘is also regarded by historians of myth as a particularly nasty version of the *vagina dentata*’ (1994: 111). Moreover, as ‘potato buds’ in Salaman’s interpretation can be also be understood as the ‘teeth serrated like those of a tiger’ (1985: 24), a jaguar, or a lion, Fausta also has the head of a lion protruding from between her legs. Even the incorporation of the potato into her body is testament to the ‘the fluidity between body and land characteristic of the pachacuti’ (1993: 42), which serves as ‘a mediating period of sacred and highly dangerous fluidity during which humans emerge from the natural world and can also return to it’, as Constance Classen notes (1993: 33). Indeed, Llosa’s cinematographer, Natasha Braier, has stated that they specifically ‘dressed Fausta mainly in earthy tones to accentuate her connection with the earth’ (n.d.), which also serves to connect the character to *pachamama*, or mother earth, especially given that the ‘Inca had many fetishes representing her spirit: special ears of corn *and potatoes*, corn stalks, household images, sculptured stones, and field stones’ (Maxwell 1956: 50-51 my emphasis). Indeed, as Earle notes, within Incan cosmology ‘potatoes were under the particular care of Axamama, the Potato Mother, daughter of the earth goddess Pachamama’ (2020: 128).

In her description of the Incas’ sensory and sensual world, Classen notes that ‘sight is associated with the visible, structured past, situated in front of the body; and hearing with the

dark, fluid future, situated behind the body' (1993: 6). From this observation, Classen deduces that, for the Inca, the future 'is not something that one can walk ahead into, but rather, something that one has to turn oneself around (*tikraricuni*) to reach', a process epitomised by the *pachacuti* itself (1993: 14). Given this context, it is especially important that Braier acknowledges that she and Llosa intentionally 'played with the idea of representation, mirroring and the double' (n.d.), which further connects Fausta with the conception of the Pachacuti. Visually and thematically *La teta asustada* is composed of numerous reversals and mirror images. For example, Juan José Beteta has explored the mythical allusions of Western origin contained in the film and notes that the story of Faust is inverted in the text (2009a). In a similar manner, Emilio Bustamante argues that Fausta relates the story of an Andean siren which is subsequently inverted in her interaction with Aída (2009). Visually, too, an extended tracking shot features Fausta walking backwards as a group of men deliver a replacement piano to Aída's home after she destroyed her original instrument. Similarly, as Aída's performance of Fausta's songs approaches, the Andean girl leaves the theatre's dressing room to approach the stage. In this instance, the audience observe her progress reflected in a mirror such that she actually retreats as she walks forwards, moving backwards towards the future. Indeed, the proliferation of mirror images throughout the film further evokes the story of Pachacuti Inca when it is remembered that he kept the crystal tablet in which the sun god appeared and that it 'served him as a mirror in which he saw anything he wanted' (Cobo 1979: 134). As José Paredes Dávila has argued, in one particular scene early in the film, a mirror image even provides a glimpse of the future. As Fausta's image is reflected in the portrait of one of Aída's military ancestors, Aída enters the frame wearing a pearl necklace, 'prefigurando el pacto entre ambas mujeres' [prefiguring the pact between both women] (2015: 66). This is not to suggest, however, that the potato comes to represent the story of Inca Pachacuti so perfectly that it excludes other

interpretations. As we have seen, the potato is an intercultural fetish which condenses and blends numerous elements of the pre-Colombian peoples of Peru, ranging from the Chavín to the Inca cultures, in order to gain its considerable power. I will now go on to argue that the potato also absorbs elements of post-contact Christianity by referring to the story of the Inkarrí, a tradition which was ‘probably influenced by ideas about the body politic and the mystic body of Christ that were introduced into the New World in the middle of the sixteenth century’ (Steele and Allen 2004: 195).

### *The Potato as Inkarrí:*

Given that Fausta’s potato becomes a mouth and creates a new head between her legs, it is also evocative of the myth of the Inkarrí. Carlos Iván Degregori provides a useful summary of the many versions of this myth, stating that ‘the Inca King (Inkarrí) was conquered by the king of Spain; he was decapitated and his head was buried. But the body is reconstructing itself from the head. When this reconstruction is complete, Inkarrí will reemerge to the earth’s surface and with him the idealized times of the Incan Empire will return’ (2012: 202n8). As the potato-head continues to grow and extend its buds deeper inside Fausta’s body, it, too, is obtaining a body through growth from the head, it is simply growing upwards rather than down. Due to the ethnographic imprecision with which Llosa constructs her film, however, Fausta’s potato is not a perfect reflection of the Inkarrí. Where the Inca myth is normally associated with maize (see Pease G. Y. 1977: 27), in *La teta asustada*, it takes the form of a potato, a substitution not without precedent in the film. As Fausta’s song of the Andean siren is repeated in her relationship with Aída, quinoa seeds undergo a process of transubstantiation and become pearls. So, too, the maize of the Inkarrí becomes a potato, an act which is also evocative of the world reversal of the Pachacuti. As

John Murra has argued, in the time of the Incas, maize was an agricultural product produced for the state and its rulers, while the potato was the food of the common people (1975: 57).<sup>3</sup> This argument is reflected in *La teta asustada* when Noé the gardener tells Fausta that he does not grow potatoes because they are cheap and don't flourish on the coast. Thus in this new version of the Inkarrí, the Inca has become a common woman and comes into being through the humble potato rather than the royal maize.

As we have seen, Fausta's potato condenses stories and belief systems from numerous cultures found in Peru ranging from the Chavín to the Christian. Indeed, its associations extend further even than this to incorporate both the historical materialist and the psychoanalytic. Paul Steele and Catherine Allen's argument that the 'Inkarrí may have derived from deep-seated Andean beliefs that equated the human head of a leader to a seed that germinates' and that 'the association of severed heads with germinating seeds is clearly expressed in Nazca iconography' (Steele and Allen 2004: 195), only strengthens the association between the potato and numerous different cultural regimes of knowledge. Indeed, it would seem also to suggest that Llosa's imprecision is in fact reflective of the overlapping and interpenetrating nature of these same regimes of knowledge throughout Peruvian history. Yet, if the potato can represent the story of the Inkarrí, and I want to go a step further than Marks and ascribe agency to the potato, the question now is what happens once the body of the new king (or rather queen) is complete?

#### *Inkarrí and Viracocha:*

Early in the film, Fausta's uncle describes the eponymous illness of 'la teta asustada' [the milk of sorrow] explaining that the trauma experienced by Fausta's mother has been

transmitted to her daughter through her breast milk. In addition, he explains that Fausta was born without a soul ‘porque de susto se escondió en la tierra’ [because it hid underground out of fright]. I argue that this component of the story is the key to understanding the potato’s agency and task, the references to the Inkarrí, and the film’s conclusion. In discussing those Moche pots which take the form of potatoes, Salaman notes that they frequently depict the mouth of a jaguar which represents Viracocha, the creator God. In one version of the Inca creation story, Viracocha sent forth the souls of humans to await him in springs, caves and other places underground, and it was the sound of his voice calling them forth that brought them into being (Urton 1999: 36). As David D. Gow notes, ‘the oldest Andean divinity was Wiraqocha, who was replaced by the sun of Tawantinsuyo, and finally by Inkarrí’ (1980: 284), and in Llosa’s version of this final incarnation of the story, the potato has been given a new mouth and its task is to call forth the souls hiding underground from the violence of the internal conflict. Thus where Aída’s performance of Fausta’s songs has previously been associated with commodification and loss, it now appears that through this act the potato finally gains a (silent) voice which calls forth the hidden Andean past so that it may flourish in the present. Indeed, it is only after the potato has completed this task that Fausta becomes the heroine of her own story. Following the performance and Fausta’s subsequent theft of the promised pearls, she collapses and demands to have the potato removed from inside her body. In traditional versions of the myth of the *vagina dentata* the hero is the man that pulls the additional teeth from the woman’s body (Raitt 1980: 418). In *La teta asustada*, Fausta’s soul returns and it is she that removes the teeth so that she can now emerge as the protagonist of her own life story.

*Conclusion:*

In his discussion of the ideological underpinning of the Maoist *Sendero Luminoso* [Shining Path] militants, Degregori dismisses those arguments which have associated the *pachacuti* and the *inkarrí* with the violence of the *Sendero Luminoso* as these ‘millenarian’ interpretations of the group ‘were not based on solid empirical evidence’ (2012: 60). Indeed, Degregori goes on specifically to argue that the *Sendero Luminoso* were ‘uncomfortable with the “inversion of the world” aspects of indigenous fiestas’ (2012: 123). As with playing on the castration fears of her would be rapists, it thus appears that by invoking these elements of indigenous cosmology Fausta discovers another effective strategy of resistance to the violence of the period. That each element also relates back to the lived experience of the internal conflict and real-world strategies of resistance is particularly important and averts a further potential problem with the film and its reception. Delacroix proffers an interesting comparative analysis of the memorial sculpture ‘El Ojo que Lloro’ – originally created by Dutch artist Lika Mutal and installed in Lima, and subsequently recreated by an indigenous community in Llinque – which is illustrative of the point. As Delacroix notes, the sculpture was originally conceived and designed to represent indigenous cosmology, particularly the figure of Pachamama, despite the European origins of its creator (2014: 231). When the same symbols were recreated by the community in Llinque, however, they interpreted the same symbols as referring directly to ‘la experiencia vivida de la violencia’ [the lived experience of the violence] and did not perceive their cosmology to be represented by the sculpture (2014: 232). Given that Llosa does not belong to the Andean community which she seeks to represent in *La teta asustada*, the danger is that the film, too, will result in ‘una valorización, al extremo, de la “cultura andina” por parte de personas que se consideran como exteriores, inclusive ajenos, a esa “cultura” considerada como una entidad homogénea’ [a valorization, at the extreme, of “Andean culture” by those persons who can be considered as exterior, or even alien, to that “culture” which is considered as a homogenous entity] (Delacroix 2014:

230). However, as we have seen, the film does not seek to represent a ‘homogenous’ culture but rather focusses on producing entangled and hybrid myths and stories which emerge from Colonial encounters. Moreover, the stories invoked by Llosa synthesize both mythical and real-world referents so that, unlike the conflicting interpretations of ‘El Ojo que Lloró’, both interpretations can be sustained simultaneously. With this in mind, it is particularly important that the potato is not only a symbol of the oppression of Andean people, but also represents the story of the Inkarrí (itself a hybrid myth resulting from Colonial encounter). Nonetheless, while it has been noted that the myth of the Inkarrí has been consistently mobilised to support claims for social justice within the Andean community (see D. D. Gow 1980; R. C. Gow 1982), this direct political association is entirely absent from Llosa’s film. For this reason, the film’s conclusion remains ambiguous and potentially troubling.

Degregori has argued that ‘[b]etween the 1920s and the 1960s, and most of all after the middle of the century, [...] the myth of the Inkarrí was gradually replaced by the myth of progress’ such that the first wave of ‘massive migrations that transformed the cities can be understood as products of this shift’ (2012: 96). Within *La teta asustada*, we witness a new wave of immigration to Lima and, through the depiction of Fausta’s family; we also observe their attempts to obtain ‘progress’ through the creation of a particularly kitsch wedding service. While the new business is a reflection of the consumerist culture in which it is enmeshed, Jon Beasley-Murray considers the family’s relationship with the various products associated with wedding rituals specifically to reject commodity fetishism. Reflecting on a scene in which the family display and describe wedding gifts to the assembled congregation, Beasley-Murray comments that ‘se destaca el valor de uso de esos objetos (“la gallina, para que no falten los huevos en la casa”), pero también algo más: un gozo estético de la cosa en sí, y en las relaciones sociales que encarna’ [the use-value of the objects is highlighted (‘the hen,



so that the couple never lack eggs in the house'), but also something else: an aesthetic pleasure in the thing itself and the social relations that it incarnates] (2014: 331-32). The same kitsch performance appears to simultaneously attest to, yet overcome commodity fetishization. So, too, during Aída's performance of Fausta's songs, the audience observe the erasure of Fausta's words as the social relations which produced them are gradually obscured and they become commodity fetishes. Nonetheless, it is through this act that Fausta (re)plants the myth of the Inkarrí in the heart of the bourgeois city, attesting to the power and agency of the intercultural fetish.

It does seem that the film lends itself to this second, more positive reading. Having taken the pearls owed to her by Aída, Fausta decides to give her mother's body to the ocean, symbolically claiming this space. This proposal would seem to be borne out by the film's final shot in which the camera zooms in on a potato plant left for Fausta as a gift by Noé, Aída's indigenous gardener with whom she has developed a particularly close relationship. It is to be presumed that this plant has been grown from the potato extracted from Fausta's vagina, and we see that it has produced twin tubers. As Salaman reminds us, within Andean culture 'twin potato tubers are regarded as being endowed with special reproductive gifts' (1985: 19), and thus the film ends with the promise of future fertility. It is notable, too, that *La teta asustada* was released in 2009, that is, the year after the UN's 'International Year of the Potato' which had been championed by the Peruvian government and came during a period in which local and international development agencies sought to valorise and incorporate Andean farmers' knowledge of potato cultivation into their development agendas (Earle 2020: 192-201). Noé's decision to plant Fausta's potato reflects this context and it is, arguably, the most important inversion in the film. In his analysis of the relation between mythologies of the devil and commodity fetishism in South America, Taussig notes that

‘whereas the imagery of God or the fertility spirits of nature dominates the ethos of labor in the peasant mode of production, the devil and evil flavor the metaphysics of the capitalist mode of production in these two regions’ (2010: 13).<sup>4</sup> As previously intimated, Beteta suggests that the Faust story is inverted in the *La teta asustada* (2009a). With that in mind, it is noteworthy that in Taussig’s discussion of labourers in the Cauca Valley in Colombia who make a devil pact to increase their productivity while working on sugar plantations, the workers not only lose their soul, but the money they gain from the exchange cannot be used productively to produce further wealth, it is in essence *infertile* (1977: 136). In complete contrast, Fausta initially has no soul to sell. Indeed, this is what she *gains* through the transaction, which is also mythologically linked to future fertility.

In the final reckoning, then, it seems that the precise nature and function of Fausta’s exchange with Aída is unknowable. Monette proposes that the simple fact that Fausta does not take an additional pearl which was not included in the original deal is suggestive of ‘el concepto andino de la reciprocidad, que implica un intercambio justo entre personas’ [the Andean concept of reciprocity, which implies a fair exchange between people] (2013). While Monette argues that this is a positive reflection of Fausta’s empowerment and ability to defend her own culture, it seems to me that the same action can be considered to be far more pessimistic. It seems that viewing the transaction as Monette suggests is to accept that the original deal was ‘a fair exchange’, that it is legitimate to capitalise, commodify and exploit indigenous suffering. From this perspective the promise of future fecundity appears to reinforce ‘the standard Marxist formula for capitalist circulation, M-C-M’ (money-commodity-more money) [...], as opposed to the circulation associated with use value and the peasant mode of production, C-M-C (commodity A-money-Commodity B; selling in order to buy)’ (Taussig 1977: 144). That is to say, the promise of fertility could be seen to

reinstate the idea that capital has a seemingly natural capacity to reproduce itself, and that continual growth should be the basis of the economy. In invoking the story of Pachacuti Inca, one is reminded that he consolidated and expanded the Inca state. It seems that a similar dynamic also underpins *La teta asustada*; there is a discursive expansion taking place, it is simply impossible to know which is the dominant force. It is perfectly possible to argue that Fausta finds a way to extend the reach of various Andean myths to the desert coast, or that in Lima they are stripped of significance and commodified. The film retains an essential and uncomfortable ambiguity, either depicting the ways in which indigenous people can navigate contemporary capitalism while retaining elements of their culture intact, or revealing the ways in which capitalism is able to capture, commodify and banalize those same cultures.

#### Notes:

1. While Fausta's mother does not reveal whether she was raped by members of Sendero Luminoso or the military, it is noteworthy that the *Informe final* [Final Report] of the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] recorded that 83% of the recorded acts of sexual violence were perpetrated by the armed forces, while 11% were attributed to subversive groups. See, vol. VI, chap. 1.5, (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación 2003).
2. As Earle argues, from the Enlightenment onwards, governments increasingly sought to encourage certain eating habits as a means to produce a more robust population and economically powerful nation, and the potato played a central role in these endeavours (2020: 52-78).
3. It is notable that Earle constructs a parallel argument emphasising that, in Europe, adoption of the potato as a foodstuff and experimentation with cultivation was first undertaken by peasant farmers, not elite actors as previously believed. Moreover, Earle proposes that this was precisely because potatoes were difficult to tax and lay beyond the control of the State. That is, until the process of commodification began (2020: 23-51).
4. While Taussig himself does not discuss any case in the Peruvian Andes, others have utilised his theories to interpret myths involving the vampiric *nakaq* arguing that they represent an awareness (and rejection) of the extraction of surplus value from indigenous labour. See (Szeminski and Ansión 1982).

#### Filmography:

Llosa, Claudia (dir.), *Madeinusa* (2006)

Llosa, Claudia (dir.), *La teta asustada* [*The Milk of Sorrow*] (2009)

Rivera, Alex (dir.) *Papapapá* (1995)

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