

## Submerged in Sound: Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga*

Jay Beck



[Link to film clip in criticalcommons.org: "Lucrecia martel's Sonic Style in LA CIENAGA"](#)

"The space you see on the screen is an illusion. You understand? An optical illusion that's called 'perspective.' But the space occupied by the sound is real. The sound waves touch the viewer. Sound is the tactile and three-dimensional component of cinema." [1]

Lucrecia Martel is a rarity among filmmakers. Not only does she have an astute sensitivity to the use of sound in her films, but she also writes her scripts with a soundscape in mind. Describing her method, she explains, "I think out the sound track well ahead of shooting – even before writing the script – and it gives me the grounding for the visuals." [2] Martel's films represent a mode of filmmaking where sound and image are conceived of as equal partners in the storytelling process, and this is borne out in a practice that emphasizes the affective qualities of sound and their ability to touch the cinema spectator. Her unique approach to dialogue, sound effects, cinematic space, in conjunction with an absence of score music, creates a haptic cinema where the combination of sounds and images triggers synesthetic sensations in the audience and engages them as active participants.

This form of active listening is central to Martel's films. The structure of her films, where sound often takes a larger signifying role than the image, trains the audience to be attentive to how the soundscape reflects, expresses, and signals character emotions and narrative details. As she explained to Jason Wood, "The great thing about the soundtrack – especially when you include the human voice as a sound – is

that it demystifies language, it deconstructs the idea of dialogue, even that of music. What's interesting about sound is that it lacks a harmonic organization, which allows the viewer to predict feelings and anticipate events." [3] The sonic elements in the film take on meaning separate from the objects that are their putative sources, and, in their purest form, they function as aural objects. As such, Martel creates an immersive soundscape in *La ciénaga* – foregrounding ambience, off-screen sounds, and the use of dialogue as sound effect – that reinforces the narrative lassitude of the characters and the miasmic locale.

### **Lucrecia Martel's Sonic Style**

One of the main ways that Martel's films have been analyzed is through her use of overlapping dialogue and speech patterns. Gonzalo Aguilar points out that this is a trademark of new Argentine cinema, and in Martel's film in particular, "dialogues are treated as soundtracks, and many times their sound texture is equally or more important than the meaning of the words." [4] The delivery of dialogue in Martel's films runs from the declamatory to shouts, whispers, asides, murmurs, and all range of vocal utterances in between. In her films dialogue has more to do with sound, structure, and rhythm than it does with communication. Indeed, Martel has discussed how much of her style of dialogue is derived from the meandering speech patterns of her family and the residents of her hometown of Salta in the far northwest of Argentina. [5] Captured within these circuitous conversations are hints at class, educational level, and regional identity that reside alongside the semantic content of the dialogue.

This verbal plenitude, often difficult to process due to several characters speaking simultaneously, was identified by Argentine film scholar Luciano Monteagudo as a form of "polyphony." Monteagudo points out how the colloquial language in *La ciénaga* reflects much more than just the dialogue itself: "One might say words in Martel's film are as polished as the magnificent sound design, a composition in itself where silence also has its own dimension. Observations, criticism, and banal comments weave a dense plurality of meanings." [6] In the journal *Jump Cut*, Dominique Russell borrows Monteagudo's concept of "polyphony" and connects Martel's dialogue to Michel Chion's notion of emanation speech, where words in film that are not completely heard or understood "are rendered in a sense as noise. Thus the narrative creates an effect of 'inside' and 'outside' at the same time; the spectator is both immersed and excluded." [7] Whereas Chion notes that emanation speech is "not essential for understanding significant action or meaning," in Martel's films, unintelligibility is often the point in several scenes. [8] The audience is not excluded but quite the opposite – emanation speech activates our interest in the characters and forces us to listen closer to the dialogue and the overall soundscape.

Specifically, Martel crafts scenes in *La ciénaga* where sound functions autonomous of the images, and she expects the audience to interpret the sounds as mood or atmosphere rather than as ontological links to visualized objects. For example, there is a moment at the beginning of the film, set around a stagnant pool at a country estate near Salta (evocatively renamed as "La Ciénaga," or "the swamp"), where the abrasive scrape of metal chairs being dragged across concrete tiles resonates with the mid-torso framing and zombie-like movements of the characters. These are just the first of many "objetos sonoros" she discusses in a brief interview that accompanies the Criterion Collection edition of the film. [9] Even though the phrase is translated in the English subtitles as "sound events," a more precise translation would be "aural

objects,” a term used by Christian Metz to describe sounds in films that function as objects unto themselves. [10] Metz was interested in how the use of pure aural objects—sounds that resist being linked to a source and which function as perceptual objects—complicate the phenomenology of sound and image relations. According to Metz, “The perceptual object is a constructed unity, *socially constructed*, and also (to some extent) a linguistic unity.” [11] Martel’s use of aural objects works to sever the phenomenological link between the sounds and their sources and to question the social construction of sounds and their meaning.

This is done predominantly through acousmatic sounds that seem to be diegetic but whose sources are not visualized. [12] From the beginning of *La ciénaga*, Martel fills the off-screen space with numerous sounds – distant thunder, muffled gunfire, bird cries, cicadas and other insects – while never showing their sources. Even though the source of a sound is occasionally shown, such as the boys hunting in the forest, the sounds themselves are used to instill a sense of the unknown and possible danger in the audience. Observing the same technique in her second feature, *La niña santa*, Gonzalo Aguilar notes that, “the relationship between cause and effect is inverted; only after hearing a sound do we see the source that produces it.” [13] This process of deacoustimization occurs throughout the film but only after each sound has established itself as an aural object with its own autonomy. Instead of the deacoustimization robbing the sound of its power, as Chion claims, the sounds retain their relative autonomy and carry with them a sense of the phantasmatic. [14] This approach lets the sounds in Martel’s films have multiple associations with the images rather than reducing them to the phenomenological links to their sources. As she explains, “Music, like the plot and like language, always allows the viewer to anticipate and even prejudge what’s next. Conversely, sound only allows the simultaneity of the experience. That’s very important when you’re trying to share emotions. It only allows you to face what you are seeing at that moment.” [15]

Her masterful use of sound also relates to spatialization and deploying planes of sound to form a field of acoustic deep focus. Martel utilizes tight framing in most of her shots to create a sense of visual claustrophobia, yet she modulates this effect by varying the range of off-screen sounds and how they signal greater or lesser senses of space. Michel Chion describes this effect of sound indicating a broad space beyond the border of the visual field as “vast extension” where sound establishes a sense of location. [16] Martel refers to this as a “sound panorama,” whereby the soundscape provides an acoustic vista for the audience. She explains: “Summer in Salta is very impressive. The city is located in a valley, and the summer storms are too loud, too noisy – the hills make a kind of an echo chamber. It’s ominous. You feel the low sounds very close, and the thunder sounds too far. And there’s an obvious technical question: low frequencies alter you on an organic level, they alert you. But there are the seasonal insects with their very high frequencies as well. That combination creates a sound panorama, which I find very interesting.” [17] Martel’s sound panoramas take on a centrifugal function, constantly pulling at the edge of the frame and reminding the audience of the world that exists beyond it. [18] As the director explains, “Off-screen space becomes far more important when you don’t show the entire scene, but rather show fragments of the scene,” [19] and the effect of revealing a sense of extended space through sound is that it activates the audience’s curiosity to that which is left unseen.

### Active listening in *La ciénaga*: a close analysis

*La ciénaga* is a text that opens itself up for study and several scholars have already explored the complex relationship between sound and image in the film. The interplay among voice, sound effects, and ambiances in the opening sequence has been explored in depth, most notably by Liz Greene, and therefore I wish to explore a section from the film where the sound design both depicts how characters listen while also prompting us to listen differently to the film. From Mecha's very first line, after she hears distant gunshots, "Con quien está Joaquín en el cerro?" ["Who's Joaquín up in the hills with?"], to José telling his sister Vero that he can hear the sound of the rain over the telephone, or Tali and Agustina hearing Jorge Calfrunes' song "El niño y el canario" bleeding through their walls from some unknown source, Martel regularly presents us with characters listening and struggling to be heard. This conflict also parallels the role of the audience. Our job is to listen attentively to the film and sort through the soundscape for relevant narrative details, most of which come through sounds and ambience rather than through dialogue.

In order to illustrate these effects I wish to briefly examine the interplay of dialogue, sound effects, and cinematic space in three brief scenes that occur approximately ten minutes into the film. After Mecha's poolside accident, she is rushed to the town of La Ciénaga and the transition is signaled abruptly through a sound stinger. The honking of a car horn becomes an audio match to boys in a truck in La Ciénaga, chasing young girls and throwing water balloons as part of Carnival. The subtle violence of the sound transition, with the explosive burst of the balloons and squeals of the girls, hints at the connection between sound, sexuality, and violence that runs throughout the film. When Tali's son Martín exits the truck and is revealed to be one of the instigators, the scene transitions from the bustling exterior street to Tali's cramped urban house. Though the busy city street is never seen again, its ambience permeates the house and continues whenever the film cuts back to the location. As Martel explains, "Because I don't have transitional shots or establishing shots, it causes the composition and the rhythm of the scene to be mostly based on sound." [20] The scenes that follow demonstrate this technique and the way that it requires spectators to listen for acoustic cues after scene changes to orient them to the new time and space of the diegesis.

Even though we never get an establishing shot of the interior of Tali's house, it is marked by several layers of sound and multiple strands of overlapping dialogue. While Tali's telephone conversation with a friend is foregrounded and privileged visually, other interactions among Martín, Luchi, Agustina, Mariana, and her friend Vero vie for attention. Their voices carry spatial materiality based on their location in the scene and we're given access to Martín's hushed comment to Luchi as well as Agustina's shouts at the neighbor's dog. The scene isn't truly polyphonic as much as it is polysonic. The voices don't demand our attention for their semantic value so much as the way that they make us aware of their presence outside of the frame. Indeed the conversation about buying school supplies in Bolivia or the girls' complaints about the water balloons are secondary to the overall sound panorama. The totality of sound, visualized and acousmatic, constructs the diegesis through spatialization.

Perhaps the most significant sound object in this scene is the dog that lives just beyond the wall of Tali's house. Its barks are introduced early in the sequence and they are heard directly with very little reverberant sound. As a result, we expect that the dog is on Tali's patio and the reaction shots from Luchi and Agustina seem to

confirm this. When Agustina admonishes the beast we never see it and realize that it resides in the neighbor's yard on the other side of the wall. Yet the sounds we hear, in relation to their loudness and frequency range, make it seem as though it is right outside the field of view and creates an illusion of the massive size and power of the dog. This break with the codes of realism prompts us to hear the dog not as he actually is but as the characters perceive it. In particular, the sound relates to Luchi's growing fear and fascination with the dog and its psychological effect on him. While Kent Jones notes "Martel's penchant for breaking up any and all spaces into their component parts and throwing out the center, so that the geography becomes strictly tied to emotions and inner-psychic connections," [21] one realizes that this connection between geography and emotion is nearly always achieved through listening rather than vision.

Another way in which listening factors into the film is through the use of textural sounds that bear material traces in their timbre. In the same scene at Tali's house, Mariana and Vero sing the children's song "Doctor Jano, cirujano" into a house fan. The resultant sound distorts and deforms their voices, literally chopping up the sound elements into fragments – placing equal emphasis on the melodic flow of the song as well as the stuttering effect itself. Moreover, the ambient drone of the fan becomes the primary sonic motif for the remainder of the scene, reinforcing the extreme temperatures of Salta in the late summer and further drawing attention to the tactility of sounds in the soundscape. Indeed, Martel regularly surrounds her audience in sounds to construct a haptic experience, noting "[t]hat experience of being immersed and submerged is a central idea in the artifice I've used to make my films." [22] More than just sound and image, the cinematic elements in Martel's films fuse to create a synesthetic experience for viewers – making them feel the heat of the city, the humidity of the air, and the mildewed smell of the locations.

Tali's telephone conversation with her husband Rafael is immediately followed by another phone call, this time between Mecha's son José and his sister Vero. Not having seen José previously in the film, the audience has to assemble the clues about his location from the soundscape. Even though his generic apartment could be located anywhere, Martel builds a precise location in Buenos Aires – specifically the upscale neighborhood of Palermo – out of the sounds of traffic, police sirens, car horns, subway rumble, and window rattle from the jets taking off from the nearby Aeroparque Jorge Newberry. "We didn't have that richness in the scenes we shot in Buenos Aires," notes Martel, "so we imagined a place near an airport for the characters. So the airplanes' engines are the low frequencies, and we also had the glass vibrations to work with." [23] The sounds function as a form of narrative shorthand and the Buenos Aires sound panorama rapidly establishes its sense of place in a very short scene.

In addition, the Buenos Aires scene introduces the character of José and gives the audience information about Mecha's condition in the hospital. As soon as the details are conveyed the film cuts to another unknown space, and the single key light on Mariana and silhouetted figure of Tali reveal the location to be the clinic where they have brought Luchi to get stitches. In typical circuitous fashion, instead of the cut on Luchi's leg, the conversation revolves around Mecha's accident and her excessive drinking. As the characters talk, their conversation reverberates around the tiled walls and distant footsteps and voices suggest the size of the unseen clinic. Even though Mecha and the other occupants of the clinic are hinted at through the offscreen aural objects they are never shown. As Gonzalo Aguilar explains, "The acousmatic provides

the image in Lucrecia Martel's films with a prominence and a depth accentuated by the superimposition and fragmentation of bodies, creating a striated realm for the offscreen space (of its sounds or of the unseen)." [24] Martel also activates genre codes through the chiaroscuro lighting and offscreen sounds, clearly borrowing from the semantics of the horror film to keep her audience in a state of unease. Offscreen space is always called forth in Martel's films, and keeping the sources of the sounds hidden not only adds to the realism of the scenes but it also increases a sense of dread invoked by the genre-based codes.

The last element that allows Martel's audience to become engaged as active listeners is a very deliberate absence of non-diegetic score music. While there are several scenes that feature sourced music, such as the cumbias heard on the streets of La Ciénaga, she avoids using music as a tool for directing audience attention or emotions. The ideas of simultaneity and uncertainty play into the scene that follows the clinic as the film cuts abruptly to a re-photographed television report of pilgrims arriving to worship at a recent sighting of the Virgin Mary. The vision, an apparition manifested on the outside of a water tank, is never shown and the filtered and distorted sound of the television broadcast gives no sense of location or space. By contrast, the image cuts to reveal Momi in bed with Isabel watching the broadcast yet the soundscape bears few if any traces of the house. Only when the phone begins to ring, completing the cycle of phone calls over the last three scenes, is the audience given a spatial sense of the house. The ringing of phones in multiple empty rooms is heard through subtle shifts in their timing, tonalities, and reverberations, reminding the viewers that the rest of the family are still in La Ciénaga.

Martel's intricately crafted soundscapes engage the audience as active listeners and advocate for a new mode of soundtrack construction that places sound on par with the image. Instead of the sounds of the film being used to reinforce the verisimilitude of the visual space, Martel's soundscapes create a world where the audience is given a narrow portal to observe the world with a vast extension of acoustic objects that assert their own phenomenological presence. Moreover, according to Martel, "the soundtrack becomes more important in the film, not only because I didn't put any music in it, but also because the story doesn't use a classical narrative structure. When that happens, everything related to the sensuality of the film (the textures, the sounds) becomes extremely important." [25] Unlike most other directors Martel wants her audience to be submerged in sound in order to activate a synesthetic experience, where sound and image add up to much more than the sum of their parts.

**Jay Beck** is Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at Carleton College. He co-edited *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound*, is American co-editor of the journal *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, and his book *Designing Sound: Audiovisual Aesthetics in 1970s American Cinema* is forthcoming from Rutgers University Press.

## Notes

[1] Voice-over narration from Martel's "la piletta invertida," in Francisco Gutiérrez, "Siete notas sobre cine." DVD/BluRay supplement, *La ciénaga* Criterion Collection, 2015

[2] Amy Taubin, "Vocational Education: An Interview with Lucrecia Martel," *Artforum* 43.8 (2005): 175.

[3] Jason Wood, "Lucrecia Martel," *Talking Movies: Contemporary World Filmmakers in Interview* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 171. See also Liz Greene, "Swamped in sound: the sound image in Lucrecia Martel's *La ciénaga/The Swamp*," *Printed Project* (2012): 52-60.

<http://www.lizgreenesound.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/LG-Swamped-in-Sound-Printed-Project.pdf>.

[4] Gonzalo Aguilar, *Other Worlds: New Argentine Film* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 84.

[5] Natalija Vekic. "Soundscape Artist: Lucrecia Martel Wants You To Listen," *Release Print* (July-August 2005): 29; David Oubiña, "Entrevista a Lucrecia Martel," *Estudio crítico sobre La ciénaga* (Buenos Aires: Picnic Editorial, 2009), 72.

[6] Luciano Monteagudo, "Whispers at Siesta Time," in *New Argentine Cinema: Themes, Auteurs and Trends of Innovation*, eds. Horacio Bernades, Diego Lerer, et al. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Tatanka, 2002), 71.

[7] Dominique Russell, "Lucrecia Martel: 'a decidedly polyphonic cinema,'" *Jump Cut* 50 (Spring 2008): 3.

<http://www.ejumcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/LMartelAudio/text.html>.

[8] Michel Chion. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 222.

[9] Gutiérrez.

[10] Christian Metz, "Aural Objects," *Yale French Studies* 60, trans. Georgia Guirrieri (1980): 27.

[11] *Ibid.*, 31; emphasis in original.

[12] Chion, 71-73.

[13] Aguilar, 90.

[14] Chion, 72.

[15] Wood, 171.

[16] Chion, 87.

[17] Fernando Martín Peña, Félix Didier, and Ezequiel Luka, "Une certain regard: Lucrecia Martel on *La ciénaga*," *Cinema Scope* (2001): 28.

[18] Jay Beck, "Acoustic Auteurs and Transnational Cinema," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, eds. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 740.

[19] Vekic, 29.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Kent Jones, "In the Thick of It," *Film Comment* 41.2 (March-April 2005): 24.

[22] Gutiérrez.

[23] Martín Peña, et. al., 28.

[24] Aguilar, 92.

[25] Martín Peña, et. al., 28.