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CRISIS, ESTRANGEMENT, AND CRITIQUE IN LUCRECIA MARTEL'S SALTA TRILOGY

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Abstract: Lucrecia Martel's first three feature films, often referred to as the *Salta Trilogy* due to their shared setting in the Salta Province of northern Argentina, depict lives, and a world, in crisis. Her critical approach to cinema furthermore draws attention to processes of perceptual crisis that occur through the interplay between characters, viewers, and the cinematic image. This essay studies the relationship between crisis and critique in her films, proposing that it is grounded in one of the central narratives of modern art: the narrative of estrangement, whereby art is a process that enacts perceptual crises and renewals, allowing viewers to see, hear, and feel things differently. The overwhelming emphasis in existing scholarship lies in the ways that Martel's films successfully estrange viewers' perception, generating a critical consciousness of reality and laying the groundwork for transformative political action. This essay, in dialogue with texts by Jacques Rancière, Roger Ebert, Ana Amado, Rei Terada, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, argues that her *Salta Trilogy* also dramatizes, and reflects on, the crisis of estrangement itself in the art cinema of the turn of the twenty-first century. By situating Martel's perception-oriented approach on the interior of the atmosphere of crisis that saturates her films, it demonstrates how they simultaneously rely on the narrative of estrangement, and consider its possible failure.

Key Words: Lucrecia Martel, *Salta Trilogy*, Crisis, Estrangement, Critique

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Lucrecia Martel's first three feature films, often referred to as her *Salta Trilogy* due to their common setting in Martel's native Salta Province in northern Argentina, demonstrate an intense interest in crisis. *La ciénaga* (2001), *La niña santa* (2004), and *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) are set in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century Salta, where life is characterized by numerous crises crossing sociopolitical, aesthetic, and epistemological registers, with the 2001 Argentine crisis looming particularly large. In this context, her films dramatize a series of personal crises in the lives of their intergenerational casts. A drunken tumble sends one character to bed and precipitates the breakdown of her marriage; another character leaves the scene of a possible hit and run, passing the next days in a dazed state; a third teenage character sees her sentimental relation with her family's domestic worker fall apart, her heartache bleeding into a loss of faith as she goes to see a local apparition of the Virgin but sees nothing. In each film, these stories are complemented by a broad array of crises that unfold on the level of the characters' perceptions of reality. In line with Martel's interest in how cinema generates spaces of perception, they register situations in which characters' habitual ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling things momentarily break down, and they aspire to catalyze similar crises in viewers through their broad-based denaturalization of established modes of cinematic storytelling.

This essay approaches Martel's *Salta Trilogy* from the standpoint of twentieth-century and contemporary understandings of cinema and crisis.[1] It proposes that Martel's use of crisis as a critical standpoint in the *Salta Trilogy*, as well as the particular centrality that crises of perception come to occupy in her experimental approach to filmmaking, are underwritten by her films' participation in one of the foundational narratives of modern art: the narrative of estrangement, which, as it emerges in key twentieth-century texts by Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, is itself structured around a crisis narrative in which works of art break down habitual modes of perception, allowing new ways of perceiving things to emerge. According to this narrative, art exists, as Shklovsky famously puts it, "[so] that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (778). And importantly, for generations of artists and filmmakers, this process has been understood to apply not only to our perception of ordinary objects, but also to the social and political framework of our world. The crises enacted by works of art expose the contingency of the way that things are, and in doing so, they can generate a critical consciousness of reality and catalyze transformative political action.

Existing scholarship has amply addressed the many ways in which Martel's films successfully participate in this narrative of estrangement. This is to say that, for most viewers, her films work: through their utilization of a range of techniques relatable to the art cinema of the twentieth century, they catalyze processes of perceptual breakdown and renewal, and in doing so, they make possible a critical re-engagement with the world. This essay argues that, in these appreciations of her films' successes, estrangement itself remains necessarily on the outside of the crises that saturate them. This reliance on the non-crisis of estrangement occludes the possibility explored here: that Martel's films might also reflect on the crisis of estrangement, pursuing the thought that, even if perception-oriented films like those of the *Salta Trilogy* should renew our sensation of things, perhaps they do not. The following pages document this narrative of failure, in which glimpsed and desired transformations of the social and political frameworks of contemporary life ultimately fall short. By situating estrangement within the atmosphere of crisis of the *Salta Trilogy*, this essay builds on previous studies of Martel's successes, and positions failure—of estrangement, and of turn-of-the-century art cinema's dreams of perceptual renewal and sociopolitical transformation—as one of the central problems investigated in her films.

1. From the vast literature on crisis and critique, this essay draws inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck's foundational *Critique and Crisis* (1959); recent reconsiderations of Koselleck by Osborne (2010), Villacañas (2013), and Roitman (2014); and the edited volume *Sovereignty in Ruins: A Politics of Crisis* (2017). For the relationship between critique and the Argentine crisis, see, among many others, Colectivo Situaciones (2002) and Sztulwark (2019). See Romero (2012) for a panorama or Argentine history in the years surrounding 2001, in which the neoliberal reforms of the final decades of the twentieth century are also understood in terms of crisis. Finally, on the relationship between the Argentine crisis and the New Argentine Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s, see, among others, Amado (2009), Page (2009), Aguilar (2010), and Andermann (2012).

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The first part develops the three-register schema outlined above, illustrating how, in her films, crisis encompasses historical, personal, and perceptual registers. It affirms the central importance of crises of perception, highlighting how her approach intentionally shifts attention from the plot to spaces of perception. It also outlines two competing interpretations of the *Salta Trilogy* from the standpoint of perceptual crisis: an optimistic narrative in which the films, through their work on perception, articulate hopeful plots of renewal and transformation, and a more somber narrative in which such hopes fall short as the characters repeatedly fall back into fallow lives in a world that will not change. The second and third parts develop an interpretation of the *Salta Trilogy* from the standpoint of the crisis of estrangement. Part 2 begins by noting how many viewers have linked the power of estrangement of Martel's films to Gilles Deleuze's influential studies of the cinematic image and of contemporary society. It then turns to Jacques Rancière's critique of Deleuze in *Film Fables*, in which Rancière argues that the turn to perception that characterizes Deleuze's approach to the cinematic image is at once foundational to the cinematic art, yet itself repeatedly falls into crisis as the old habits and modes of storytelling undermined by perception-based filmmaking reemerge. It concludes with a consideration of how this crisis comes into relief as a problem for art-house cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century. Part 3 returns to the narratives of failure that traverse Martel's *Salta Trilogy*, constructing a dialogue between a recent essay by Rei Terada on Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose experience of a similar crisis of estrangement in the mid-1970s led him to repudiate his *Trilogy of Life* series, and Martel's films, whose characters, as Ana Amado puts it in a foundational study of La ciénaga, "no comunican utopias sino pura derrota" ("Velocidades" 52).

In her 2014 book *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman, observing that "[c]risis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today" (3), explains that it typically functions as a concept that generates an "Archimedean point of observation and validation" from which to view and narrate history (32). Drawing on the social theory of Niklas Luhmann, she emphasizes that to observe a crisis is never an objective observation; it is always a second-order observation that carries an inherent normativity. As Roitman puts it, "[e]voking crisis entails reference to a norm because it requires a comparative state for judgment: crisis compared to what" (4).[2] This procedure, in a tradition that stretches back to the Enlightenment-era salons and masonic lodges studied by Reinhart Koselleck in *Critique and Crisis*, provides the grounds for the observer to formulate projects of critique and transformative action: it is to "[posit] an "epistemological impasse," and simultaneously "found the possibility for other historical trajectories or even for a (new) future" (4). In *Anti-Crisis*, Roitman studies how, from Koselleck's salons and lodges to recent discussions of the 2008 financial crisis, the term "crisis" has served as a "transcendental placeholder" or "enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge" (13). The present essay follows a similar strategy with Martel's *Salta Trilogy*. It makes visible how the crisis narrative of estrangement functions as a generative blind spot at the intersection of observation and normativity, and it investigates how her films might be viewed and understood otherwise.

PART I. CONFIGURATIONS OF CRISIS IN MARTEL'S CINEMA OF PERCEPTION

The films of the *Salta Trilogy* dramatize a series of personal crises in the lives of mostly middle-class characters, exhibiting a particular interest in the experiences of women. In *La ciénaga*, the teenage character Momi experiences a sentimental crisis as her relationship with the family's young Indigenous maid Isabel falls apart. Her mother, Mecha, takes an embarrassing drunken tumble that sends her to the hospital, leading her to isolate herself in her bedroom, and precipitating the collapse of her marriage. And at film's end, Tali, a family friend, finds herself on the verge of a massive crisis, as viewers (but not Tali) witness the presumed

2. This understanding of the inherent normativity of crisis is not limited to Roitman's Luhmannian approach. See de Man (1962) for a classic treatment of the topic.

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death of her young son, who falls from a ladder on the family's patio. *La niña santa*, for its part, documents the crises of faith of two adolescents, Amalia and Josefina, who attend religious classes but have begun to question their beliefs; it also dramatizes a process of trauma and sexual awakening in Amalia as she is groped twice by a doctor who is attending a conference at the hotel managed by her mother. In the wake of these assaults, she experiences a renewed understanding of her purpose in life, coming to believe that she must save the doctor. The movie ends just prior to the unfolding of another crisis: as the teenage girls enjoy a swim together in the hotel pool, the doctor's crimes are on the verge of being publicly revealed at the conference.

Both of Martel's first two movies weave their stories out of these and an array of smaller crises in the lives of their ensemble, multi-generational casts. Time and again, lives are thrown into disarray, on scales ranging from intensely personal situations to events that reverberate through the social worlds the characters inhabit. And, in both cases, the positioning of an additional major crisis just beyond the film's end works to establish crisis as an ongoing, unresolved condition. The films come to an end, but the crises promise to continue.

La mujer sin cabeza (2008) inverts the plot arc of *La niña santa* by depicting a private crisis that, unlike the doctor's groping of Amalia, will not ultimately become public. At the beginning of the film, Vero, an upper-middle-class dentist, hits something with her car (a dog, perhaps, or a young boy who was playing by the side of the road), and flees the scene of the accident. The film studies her experiences as she resumes her life while processing the event. It also documents the machinations of the men in her life as they endeavor to cover up the evidence of her potential crime. Here, in contrast to *La niña santa*, the movie ends with the seemingly successfully forestalling of the crisis: Vero enters a hotel where, after confirming that the record of her stay in the hours after the accident has been erased from the register, she enters a room where smooth music is playing and people are dancing, and takes her place amongst family and friends. While Vero's return to her habitual place in society marks the resolution of her personal predicament, the viewer finds it difficult to avoid an allegorical interpretation in which her reabsorption into her social circle marks the ongoing crisis of a sociopolitical order in which the impunity of the wealthy and powerful remains the norm.[3]

These portraits of mostly middle-class characters occupy a vague present stretching from the 1990s into the 2000s, with few historical markers to anchor each film in history.[4] In general, the films only obliquely reference public life and the major political and economic events of their time, preferring to remain largely within the domains of private and family life. Nonetheless, the social decline of Argentina during the neoliberal government of Carlos Menem in the 1990s, culminating in the economic collapse and popular revolt of late 2001, forms an ineludible backdrop. Even if the films' middle-class families are somewhat insulated from the effects, the overlapping crises of turn-of-the-century Argentina occupy what Alfredo Dillon describes as an "espacio' temático" encompassing a series of figures: "el colapso colectivo, el derrumbe personal y las trayectorias de movilidad descendente, la catástrofe individual, la visibilización de las desigualdades, la disolución de los horizontes de futuro, etcétera" (51). In addition, the films are released in the context of multiple crises unfolding on the interior of cinema itself. These include the crisis enacted by the New Argentine Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s on older models of Argentine cinema, as well as broader narratives of crisis in cinema history—most notably, for many of Martel's viewers, that of the mid-century crisis of the movement-image of classical cinema as it is studied by Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema 1* and *2* series, which will be discussed in greater detail below. Crisis thus not only marks the stories told in the *Salta Trilogy*; it forms a sort of general atmosphere

3. As Martel herself notes, *La mujer sin cabeza* references contemporary news stories of upper-class Argentines evading punishment for automobile accidents ("Para mí"). Silvia Schwarzböck relates Vero's impunity to historical processes stretching back to the 1930s, when military elites took power and inserted family members throughout the national bureaucracy (*Los espantos* 138-9).

4. *Mostly* middle class because Martel also exhibits a sustained interest in the lives of the Indigenous communities of northern Argentina. This essay could be supplemented by a study of the crises of Indigenous characters such as Isabel in *La ciénaga* and Erick, the adolescent protagonist of the short film *Leguas* (2015).

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enveloping the characters' lives and the films themselves.

In addition to the personal and historical crises that traverse each film, the *Salta Trilogy* is notable for its treatment of crisis in the perceptual register. Martel understands cinema as an art form that is at its most powerful when it turns away from the plot and focuses on perception, seeking to directly engage with, and potentially alter, the ways that audiences see, hear, and feel things. As she puts it in a 2008 interview, "Para mí el cine es la oportunidad de compartir con los espectadores no una historia—que en realidad me parece una excusa, un residuo de la película—sino un lugar de percepción" ("Para mí" 9). In line with this understanding of cinema, the *Salta Trilogy* immerses viewers into the sights and sounds of her characters' lives, drawing our attention away from the plot so that we might perceive myriad other elements of a world of constant sound and movement.[5] Here, again, crisis occupies a central place. The sequences of visual and auditory images of Martel's films typically revolve around jarring experiences that jolt characters (and viewers) outside of their habitual ways of experiencing the world. These sequences point in various directions, ranging from Vero's extreme quietism in the days after the accident, to exhilarating, shared moments of intimacy between characters such as Amalia and Josefina. At times, they remain un-surmounted, and at others, the breakdown of old modes of perception points tantalizingly toward new ways of experiencing life.[6] Martel's films demonstrate a sustained interest in these sorts of situations. They are, as Deborah Martin puts it, "strongly diegetically preoccupied with situations of perceptual uncertainty and crisis, as well as with the creation of new objects of perception" (12). This diegetic preoccupation, in turn, aspires to catalyze similar experiences in viewers. As Gerd Gemünden puts it: "her goal is to force viewers into a new relation with the cinematic image" (4-5). Perceptual experimentation, in this sense, bridges diegetic and extra-diegetic planes. It is what interpellates viewers into her films' stories and atmospheres of crisis.

To watch Martel's films is to engage with these different registers: crisis as the basic thematic content of her characters' stories; crisis as a historical event and as an ongoing historical condition; and perceptual crisis as the central device of Martel's cinema of perception. Each viewer develops strategies for configuring these registers, entering into dialogue with the strategies Martel uses as a filmmaker. Of these strategies, perhaps the most notable begins with her turn away from cinema as a storytelling medium in favor of using cinema to generate spaces of perception. To the extent that Martel defines cinema in terms of perception, it seems imperative to ground any understanding of her Salta Trilogy in the crises of perception that are captured by the camera and the microphone, suffered by the characters, and elicited in the films' viewers.[7]

Critics working outward from the perceptual register have arrived at two general configurations. In the first, characters' crises of perception may expose fleeting possibilities of renewal, but, when they are recombined with the films' downbeat stories and dark historical atmosphere, these possibilities are revealed to be illusory. The characters may yearn to see things differently, but they ultimately encounter no means of escape. As David Oubiña puts it: "[p]ara bien o para mal, nada puede hacerse porque cualquier posibilidad de cambio depende de una voluntad superior que excede a los personajes" (30). In an early review of *La ciénaga*, Silvia Schwarzböck and Hugo Salas frame this pessimistic view of life in Salta in terms of the director's impious gaze. She sees her characters not in terms of how they nobly strive for another way of life (a pious gaze would want more than anything to recuperate this nobility), but rather in terms of how they inevitably fall back on "la verdad tranquilizadora que los mantiene encerrados," thus remaining within a social order that is, as they put it, "todo lo contrario de un orden a punto de caer" (11). Jens Andermann, for his part, highlights

5. See Martin (2016, p. 10) for a helpful outline of some of Martel's core techniques.

6. Andermann describes the relationship the films establish with the viewer in terms of a "problem of sensorial disjuncture between sight, hearing, and touch which in all of Martel's cinema provides a kind of basic grammar of composition. While making the shot uncertain and ambiguous for the spectator, this sensorial disjunction at the same time forges an enigmatic interpellation of the intradiegetic subject, which is never fully in perceptual control of the situation in which she finds herself involved" (158).

7. The turn away from storytelling here described by Martel is, to a significant extent, illusory. If her films establish a negative relationship with traditional modes of storytelling in cinema, they also construct their own, alternate modes of telling stories. See Page (2013) and Gordon (2017) for studies of Martel's storytelling, and Dillon (2014) for an analysis of how her fatalistic perspective relates to tragedy. The present essay aims to complement existing scholarship on Martel's storytelling by studying how one story—the narrative of estrangement—is told and re-told in her films.

how Martel's films empty into visions of recent history as ongoing (and un-surmounted) crisis, underlining how the sensorial disjuncture experienced by characters and viewers relates to a mode of historical experience, specific to the televisual immediacy and neoliberal declarations of the end of history of the turn of the twenty-first century, "in which time manifests itself as stagnation and repetition, and change only comes about in the form of 'accidents' and 'miracles'" (159). These accidents and miracles, however, function as exceptions that prove the rule; as Andermann puts it, they "keep things in place by introducing among them a moment of radical discontinuity" (161), sustaining a social order that the unhappy characters cannot, and will not, escape.

Via this impious gaze, crisis saturates the field of perception, producing a critical negativity in which the only possibilities of renewal are ciphered in fleeting moments of suspension that, by making visible the limits of the films' worlds, preserve a degree of openness to future change. Schwarzböck, for example, calls attention to a series of spectral presences in *La mujer sin cabeza*, beginning with the young boy who appears at the margins of Vero's field of vision just before her accident, and proposes that they have a critical effect similar to that of the dead who, in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, "pesan *como una pesadilla* sobre la *conciencia* de los vivos" (140, emphasis in original). Ana Forcinito, for her part, pits the oppressive visual spaces and scripts of Martel's films against fleeting glimmers that occasionally interrupt the crisis:

> No hay un afuera de la violencia ni en el espacio visual ni en el lenguaje articulado. En Martel son los destellos invisibles y los susurros casi inaudibles las intermitencias que interrumpen la dominación masculina y heteronormativa (74).

Andermann suggests that such moments of marking limits have to do with how cinema and its production processes, in comparison to the seemingly immediate engagement of television and digital media with the unfolding crises of the twenty-first century, lags behind current events, "interven[ing] as a different, critical temporalization of the image" and allowing for a form of critical self-awareness to emerge at the level of the cinematic image itself" (163). By marking the limits of crisis, these specters, glimmers, and out-of-joint images generate a critical consciousness and an openness toward new possibilities that might emerge in the future. If Martel's films show us that there is no hope for the characters, they thus also suggest that somehow there may be hope for us yet.

The second configuration inverts the terms of the first. It acknowledges the movies' unhappy stories and pessimistic visions of life in Salta, but it insists on a second, more optimistic viewing that recuperates affirmative processes of transformation encoded in scenes of perceptual renewal at the heart of her films. Eva-Lynn Jagoe and John Cant, for example, find in *La niña santa* a world replete with possibilities for Amalia and Josefina, whose experiences transcend the rigid adult social order: "Mientras los adultos sufren los traumas causados por sus inhibiciones y represiones, el placer que sienten las jóvenes con sus cuerpos apunta a una forma de progreso humano" (177). Deborah Martin, for her part, highlights how situations of "perceptual crisis or flux" form part of transformative processes that transcend a stagnant social order:

> it is primarily […] their representation of crises, shifts, and renewals of perception, and their production of such renewals in the spectator via their aesthetic organization, as well as their figuring of desire, that constitute the major sites of transformation and optimism in these works (14).

In these interpretations, broad acknowledgments of the films'

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negativity are supplemented by studies of affirmative processes that radiate outward from the perceptual register.

This affirmative configuration, in turn, allows for compelling parallels between the films and historical experiences related to the 2001 crisis. One might, for example, set the crises and renewals of Martel's films in dialogue with how, in an influential text, Colectivo Situaciones narrates the mass protests of December 19 and 20, 2001 in terms of the breakdown of old ways of life and the subsequent emergence of new perceptions that oriented protesters toward new modes of association:

> Lo que sí queremos decir es que si para el 19 y el 20 era evidente el agotamiento de formas de vida establecidas—la crisis—, fue la experiencia colectiva de la movilización la que permitió nuevas percepciones—sobre la crisis, sobre las resistencias—encontrando continuidades y parentescos con lo que existía, pero también fundando otros ámbitos de encuentro, diálogo y cooperación. (71).

The protesters on the street, like the characters in Martel's films and the audiences who gather in the theaters, are caught up in a transformative process in which an expansive crisis makes visible the exhaustion of established ways of life and forms the backdrop for a renewed participation in collective existence. In this sense, if, as Amado emphasizes, the popular revolts generated "un repertorio de escenas y formas visuales traducidos por distintos lenguajes estéticos (mediático, teatral, plástico y fílmico)" (*La imagen* 13), then the notion of the *lugar de percepción* through which Martel defines cinema in the above-cited 2008 interview might be understood as one such scene in this post-crisis repertoire. Her films, produced in the midst of this "clima de revuelta popular" (13), partake in the collective experience of crisis, extending from the streets to the movie theaters and the aesthetic language of filmmakers, in which the perceptual fabric of life takes on a renewed visibility and is interrogated and remade into new modes of association.[8]

These configurations broadly address the ways in which the perceptual crises of the *Salta Trilogy* flow into the films' plots and their immediate historical context. In doing so, they share a common strategy: they treat the crisis of perception as an event that befalls characters and viewers, and which is subsequently narrativized. It fits into the stories told by the movies, and the stories that we tell ourselves about our world through the movies. Yet, if one looks at things from another angle, the story of the crisis and renewal of perception also has a long and well-known history in modern art, cinema, and aesthetic theory, where, from foundational essays by Shklovsky and Brecht to the present, the narrative of estrangement has been told and re-told to explain how art, by helping us to see, hear, and feel things differently, establishes the grounds for a critical consciousness of reality and allows us to work toward political change. In this sense, perceptual crisis is not just an event that befalls us when we engage with art; it is a central narrative device in the stories that we tell ourselves about art both prior to and after our engagement with each new painting, novel, or film.

PART 2. CRISIS COMPARED TO WHAT: CRISIS, ESTRANGEMENT AND THE *SALTA TRILOGY*

This section explores how the narrative of estrangement weaves its way through Martel's *Salta Trilogy*, and positions that narrative within her movies' atmosphere of crisis. Rather than turning back to canonical works by Shklovsky and Brecht, it begins by noting one prominent way in which estrangement has been actualized in Martel scholarship: through recourse to Gilles Deleuze's works, and especially his two-volume series on the cinematic image.[9] A pair of observations by critics seeking to explain perceptual crises in Martel's films illustrate how turns

8. See Sztulwark (2019) for a consideration of the 2001 crisis as a "sensible offensive" that sets in motion perceptual transformations that, in turn, give shape to new ideas.

9. See Boym (2005) for an actualization of Shklovsky's theory of estrangement for the twenty-first century.

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to Deleuze have functioned as actualizations of estrangement. Martin affirms:

> Martel's films are […] strongly diegetically preoccupied with situations of perceptual uncertainty and crisis, as well as with the creation of new objects of perception. *Echoing Shklovsky*, Martel's feature films in particular suggest that our perception is educated and habitual, and that this education is a function of ideology. (12, emphasis added).

She then goes on to cite Deleuze's studies of the time-image in modern cinema and how, from a Deleuzian perspective, certain films retain "the potential to rupture perceptual regimes and to create thought" (13). Joanna Page, for her part, recalls Shklovsky in her distinction between older, ideological modes of criticism and more recent modes that comprehend the fact that "*the function of all art is to renew perception* rather than to convey a message" ("Folktales" 85; emphasis added). She, like Martin, then goes on to reference Deleuze (and Félix Guattari) in order to relate this renewal of perception to art's political significance, arguing that

> its most effective political strategy—as Deleuze and Guattari admired so greatly in Kafka's writing—is not 'to protest oppressive institutions or propose utopian alternatives, but to accelerate the deterritorializing tendencies that are already present in the world (85).

In both cases, references to Deleuze reaffirm the bond between art and estrangement. If, recalling Shklovsky, art exists so that we can perceive the stoniness of the stone, then Deleuze provides a powerful framework for understanding how, in contemporary films such as those of Martel, estrangement continues to take place.[10]

One reason why Deleuze forms a natural fit with Martel lies in the centrality of crisis narratives to his perspective on cinema and contemporary life. In *Cinema 1* and *2*, Deleuze views the history of film in terms of the transition from the movement-image of classical cinema to the time-image of modern cinema. The central event of this narrative is the mid-century crisis of naturalistic understandings of how the cinematic image engages with human perception. For Deleuze, classical films relied on analogies to describe the relationship between directors' procedures of montage, the cinematic image, and the perceptual apparatus of the viewer. The horrors of the Second World War shattered these analogies, and the time-image of modern cinema emerges from the epochal crises wrought by war, genocide, and other factors specific to the mid-century context.[11] If crisis marks the central event of Deleuze's Cinema series, it also forms the general atmosphere of his studies of contemporary society. As he puts it in "Postscript on the Societies of Control": "[w]e are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure—prison, hospital, factory, school, family. The family is an 'interior,' in crisis like all other interiors—scholarly, professional, etc." (4). Recent history falls under the sign of this crisis that envelops the disciplinary institutions of modern society. In these works, crisis has a generative quality: it is what catalyzes the emergence of the time-image, and it is what impels the thinker of the societies of control "to look for new weapons" ("Postscript" 4). It shapes Deleuze's historical perspective, as an observed event, but also as a narrative device that organizes his thought.[12] And importantly, this understanding of crisis is similar to that found in Martel's movies: her investigations into the relationship between perception and the cinematic image flow naturally into Deleuze's perspective in *Cinema 1* and *2*, and the historical atmosphere of her films is characterized by a crisis that, as in Deleuze's societies of control, extends from public institutions into the heart of private and family lives.

10. For other prominent uses of Deleuze in Martel scholarship, see Page (2009), Andermann (2012), and Mizrahi and Mc Namara (2017). Also see Incaminato (2020, pp. 209-336) for a study of uses of Deleuze in Argentine literary criticism.

11. For Deleuze's description of this crisis, see the last chapter of *Cinema 1*, titled "The Crisis of the Action Image." Throughout his *Cinema* series, Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson's work in *Matter and Memory*. Deleuze describes that book's impact upon its 1896 publication in terms of crisis: "It was the diagnosis of a crisis in psychology" (Cinema 1 xiv).

12. Deleuze also assigns a central importance to crisis in his understanding of the process of thinking. See the pieces on Michel Foucault included in *Negotiations* (1992). In reference to Foucault, Deleuze explains: "after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* he went through a general crisis, in his politics, his life, his thought. *As with all great thinkers, his thought always developed through crises and abrupt shifts that were the mark of its creativity, the mark of its ultimate consistency*" (83, emphasis added). And, in a different interview, "I think Foucault's thought is a thought that didn't evolve but *went from one crisis to another.* I don't believe thinkers can avoid crises, they're too seismic" (104, emphasis in original).

Interestingly, however, this bringing-together of Martel and Deleuze ultimately produces a critical standpoint outside of crisis. When, in dialogue with Deleuze, one observes how Martel's investigations into perception renew cinema's power of estrangement, one effectively proposes that *that power of estrangement itself is not in crisis*. Art *can* still make the stone stony, because this movie *can* still renew our perception; the narrative of estrangement emerges unscathed. The following paragraphs ask how estrangement itself might be reabsorbed into the atmosphere of crisis from which it has typically taken leave.

In *Film Fables*, Jacques Rancière provides an initial means for understanding, and historicizing, Deleuze's use of crisis in his *Cinema* series. For Rancière, Deleuze's approach relies on the interplay of crisis narratives unfolding on two distinct levels. On a first level, his narration of the mid-century break between classical and modern cinema hinges on the above-mentioned breakdown of the naturalized analogies between montage, image, and human perception of early cinema, and the emergence of the "world of pure optical and sound situations" of the time-image of modern films (115). On a second level, Deleuze complements this general narrative by citing situations of perceptual breakdown, inhibition, and paralysis in specific mid-century films (such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*), and using these situations to narrate how the crisis of the movement-image plays out at the level of the cinematic image itself. In the vertigo of James Stewart's character in *Vertigo*, and in the temporary paralysis of Stewart's character in *Rear Window*, "situations of sensory-motor rupture […] throw the logic of the movement-image into crisis" (115), leading to the renewal enacted in postwar films' explorations of the time-image. This narrative of estrangement, unfolding in the micro-narratives of perceptual crisis that traverse the movies of directors like Hitchcock, is at the heart of Deleuze's study of the cinematic image. If, as Rancière puts it, "Deleuze's whole analysis has to rely on the allegorical content of the fable" (118), this fable is that of the crisis of the movement-image as it is dramatized in mid-century cinema's micro-narratives of breakdown and paralysis, and of the subsequent emergence of the time-image.

Rancière dissolves this fable into a vision of cinema as an art form traversed by a double crisis. On the one hand, a series of figures throughout film history, from Jean Epstein to Deleuze and Jean-Luc Godard, have turned to the perceptual register to show how cinema undermines classical modes of storytelling. If cinema inherits older, Aristotelian definitions of storytelling grounded in the well-ordered actions of the tragic poem, these figures define cinema in terms of how the camera, with its unique capacity to perceive and register a world in constant motion, "simply records the infinity of movements that gives rise to a drama a hundred times more intense than all dramatic reversals of fortune"(2). The camera lays bare the artifice of the Aristotelian mode, exposing us to the fact

> [that life] is not about stories, about actions oriented towards an end, but about situations open in every direction. Life has nothing to do with dramatic progression, but is instead a long and continuous movement made up of an infinity of micro-movements. (2)

Yet, as Rancière insists, the history of cinema is also that of the recurrent crisis of this perception-based approach. Throughout the twentieth century, in films such as those made in Hollywood, "the young art of cinema did more than just restore ties with the old art of telling stories: it became that art's most faithful champion" (3). Film directors, for Rancière, epitomize the figure of the modern artist due to how they experience both sides of this dual crisis: if they comprehend the camera's power to renew perception, they also understand how the production apparatus of cinema (financing, script-writing, distribution,

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etc.) tends to re-absorb their experiments back into the older modes of storytelling they try to undermine. Directors, "more than any other artist, [are] doomed to transform [their] mastery into servitude, to put [their] art at the service of companies whose business is to control and cash in on the collective imaginary" (10). The drama of perception thus animates modern cinema, but modern cinema also revolves around the crisis of that drama: it is provisionally addressed by each film, and it is the indissoluble problem of the cinematic art.[13]

Rancière's perspective provides a blueprint for reconsidering how Martel's *Salta Trilogy* engages with cinema history. Her films have traditionally been understood to bring about a crisis in the allegorical (or, in Rancière's terms, Aristotelian) modes of storytelling that had long characterized political cinema in Argentina. The *Salta Trilogy*, by shifting its emphasis to perception, estranges this established paradigm and enacts a renewal of the cinematic art. Page describes Martel's films in terms of their "reflexive breakdown of allegory" (182), in which the filmmaker uses of a series of "rupturing devices" (184) that take aim at the distinctions between private and public lives, and between literal and symbolic registers, that ground allegorical storytelling. The films "register a crisis in the very structures of signification that embed the individual and the private within the general and the public," and in doing so "stage a collapse of distinctions […] on which more conventional political filmmaking has been predicated" (192). Similarly, Esteban Mizrahi and Rafael Mc Namara, following Deleuze, approach Martel's films through a distinction between the linear, teleological succession of historical time, which remained in the foreground of the political cinema of the 1980s and 90s, and the plural, discontinuous time of becoming that is the primary focus of Martel's "cine de pensamiento" (32). Her films, by situating themselves in "la pura inmanencia de lo que acontece mediante el amontonamiento caótico de eventos" (54), seek to account for the never-ending sequence of events that rupture the temporal structures of historical time, producing "un lenguaje cinematográfico novedoso con el que consigue pensar esta negativa pertinaz y con ello se pone a la altura del acontecimiento" (61). For these critics, the film-historical and political significance of her movies is grounded in such distinctions between an older mode of cinematic storytelling that has entered into crisis, and a newer mode of perception-oriented filmmaking that has not—epitomized in Martel's films but often extended to categories such as art-house cinema, auteur cinema, or the New Argentine Cinema of the 1990s and 2000s.[14]

Yet, following Rancière, one might also ask how Martel's films also reflect on the possibility of crisis within their own mode of filmmaking. If, as Mizrahi and Mc Namara emphasize, there is an irreducible newness to the techniques she uses in each movie to think through events that must always be accounted for in the present, these techniques also possess an ineludible familiarity. They are derived, as Martin puts it, from "well-worn art-house techniques" (10), and, in their immediate recognizability in relation to cinema history, they might also be situated within Rancière's dual narrative, in which perceptual filmmaking is also perpetually threatened by crisis. Roger Ebert, in his 1995 review of Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express*, sketches one such narrative of how a crisis of perception-based cinema was playing out in the years leading up to Martel's first feature films. He begins with an anecdote about how Quentin Tarantino, introducing *Chungking Express* at a screening at UCLA, tells the audience that he cried when he watched the film, "not because the movie was sad, he said, but because 'I'm just so happy to love a movie this much.'" Ebert, striking an ironic tone, goes on to explain:

> I didn't have to take out my handkerchief a single time during the film, and I didn't love it nearly as much as he did, but I know what he meant: This is the kind of movie you'll relate to

13. A broader consideration of the dialogue between Deleuze and Rancière exceeds the scope of this paper. See Conley (2009) for a helpful study of Rancière's film theory and its critical engagement with Deleuze.

14. See Gundermann (2005) for a broader account of how the New Argentine Cinema estranges hegemonic modes of filmmaking.

> if you love film itself, rather than its surface aspects such as story and stars. It's not a movie for casual audiences, and it may not reveal all its secrets the first time through, but it announces Wong Kar-Wai, its Hong Kong-based director, as a filmmaker in the tradition of Jean-Luc Godard.

Here, Ebert presents two distinct audiences: the casual audience and the art-house audience. He then establishes an equivalence: both audiences know exactly what they're looking for in a movie. The casual viewer is interested in easily digestible stories and celebrity culture, and the art-house viewer wants a film that challenges them and doesn't give up all its secrets in one viewing. This equivalence is important due to the fact that Ebert's description of Wong's approach hews close to both Martel's understanding of her own cinema and to Deleuze's understanding of modern cinema. In each case, the shift away from the plot and toward the perceptual medium is designed to generate crises in the audience's habitual ways of viewing cinema. Yet Ebert, more than a bit mean-spiritedly, questions whether these crises take place. Rather than productive estrangement, Wong's film may cause nothing more than non-productive frustration in the casual viewer who, having grown up on the relatively meager offerings of video stores, "may simply be puzzled by Chungking Express instead of challenged." Art-house viewers, for their part, rather than experiencing a generative process of perceptual renewal, may only be deriving a second-degree, intellectual enjoyment from their recognition of techniques that, by 1995, they had come to anticipate from art cinema. "It needs to be said, in any event, that a film like this is largely a cerebral experience: You enjoy it because of what you know about film, not because of what it knows about life." In Ebert's estimation, one might say, the narrative of estrangement guiding art cinema has itself entered into crisis in the time separating Godard and Wong, with a vapid intellectualism taking the place of vital processes of perceptual transformation.

Ebert's review is helpful for how it dramatizes the relationship between art cinema and crisis, and for how it questions whether the narrative of estrangement can still be presumed to work in the art cinema of the mid-nineties. One might propose, however, that his indictment of art cinema at least partially misses the mark. Ebert offers a historical narrative in which the crisis of art-house cinema in the 1990s is contrasted with a past state of non-crisis: "[w]hen Godard was hot, in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was an audience for this style, but in those days, there were still film societies and repertory theaters to build and nourish such audiences." Yet, in dialogue with Rancière, one might instead propose that this crisis is coterminous with the history of art cinema itself, reaching particular intensity in the works of different directors and national traditions at different historical conjunctures, and allowing for different resolutions—of which Ebert's ironic detachment is but one. In *Film Fables*, Rancière defines cinema in terms of the thwarted fable, that is, the plot of the film that is thwarted by the drama of perception, but also the fable of perceptual renewal that is thwarted when cinema is re-exposed to the old Aristotelian mode of storytelling (10). And if, as this essay suggests, that second thwarted fable typically follows the narrative of estrangement, then one could say that, over the history of art cinema, filmmakers have repeatedly taken the crisis of that narrative as a topic for reflection. Cinema is an art that estranges perception, but also an art where such estrangement is thwarted.

PART III: THWARTED FABLES OF ESTRANGEMENT IN MARTEL AND PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

How might Martel's Salta Trilogy be understood on the interior of this crisis of perception-based cinema and its guiding narrative of estrangement? This final part elaborates a configuration of crisis, estrangement, and critique in which the normative statement that art

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ought to renew our perception is complemented by the bleak observation that it does not. It begins by studying plots of non-renewal in Martel's films, illustrating that, if they dramatize processes of estrangement, they also, and simultaneously, stage their failure. It then construct a dialogue between a 2006 study of *La ciénaga* by Ana Amado and a recent essay on Pier Paolo Pasolini by Rei Terada to flesh out an understanding of the ways in which art filmmakers such as Martel and Pasolini have reflected on this failure of estrangement.[15]

In *La ciénaga*, a plot of non-renewal can be extracted from two statements made by Momi. The first, at the beginning of the movie, expresses the happiness she feels as a result of a recent renewal of perception; the second, at film's end, expresses her disappointment that a similar process did not take place. In one of the opening shots, as Momi and Isabel are lying in bed during a siesta, Momi repeatedly whispers thanks to God for the presence of Isabel: "Señor, gracias por darme Isabel." For Momi, this gift seems to be understood in terms of perception: the event of Isabel's arrival into her life has allowed her to feel things differently, and this is what she is thankful for. Their relationship traverses the film, with Isabel ultimately departing the household where she has been repeatedly mistreated. After Isabel's departure, Momi reports to her sister that she visited the site of the apparition of the Virgin, then explains, in the last line of dialogue: "No vi nada." One might imagine that she went to the site in search of something on the order of what Isabel provoked in her: something that would once again produce a new way of seeing things. Yet the renewal does not take place—Momi, having seen nothing, manifests her resignation. Her experience, in turn, fits into the film's broader study of visions, but also non-visions, of the image of the Virgin. In television clips and in family conversations, some people's sightings of the Virgin are repeatedly juxtaposed with the experiences of others who yearn to, but do not see the image. In this way, *La ciénaga*'s treatment of perceptual renewal is intertwined with the thought that it may not, or will not, take place.

La mujer sin cabeza, for its part, revolves around the non-revelation of Vero's possible vehicular homicide. In the end, there will be no crisis in her public image, and the community's view of her will not be revisited in light of her crime. The final sequence confirms this non-revelation by dramatizing Vero's re-assumption of her habitual place in Salta society. After she enters the hotel and confirms that her name is not in the register, the film cuts to a shot of translucent swinging doors, with blurred silhouettes exchanging friendly greetings behind the glass in a bar or restaurant area. The movie ends in this room, with Vero circulating amongst friends amid a soft din of conversations and the prominent sounds of a pop song by Greek singer Demis Roussos ("Mamy Blue," 1988), which, as Martel notes, was meant to conjure the atmosphere of the military dictatorship ("Para mí" 9). Throughout the sequence, Martel employs the devices she uses throughout the *Salta Trilogy*, including wide shots populated with figures at different depths and a disorienting overabundance of auditory inputs. Yet if these devices have the same sort of disjunctive effect on viewers as they are thought to have throughout the trilogy, here the viewer's disorientation does not parallel, but instead opposes, the experience of the character: Vero's passage into the bar does not dramatize her estrangement, but rather what might be understood as her un-estrangement. She ends the film by slowly—at times awkwardly, but at times with a grace that stands in contrast to earlier interactions—slipping back into her social circle. The Roussos song envelops the characters and their voices in an air of ease and normalcy, marking the final dissipation of a crisis that, although it ought to occur from the standpoint of the viewer (Vero should be called to account for her actions), it ultimately will not.

The twists and turns of Martel's characters' stories empty into these dismal conclusions, forming part of a general atmosphere of failure. Ana

15. See Losada (2010) and Vázquez-Rodríguez (2024) for studies of Martel's films alongside those of Pasolini. Losada underlines how Martel, like Pasolini, estranges the conventions of commercial cinema, and Vázquez-Rodríguez draws on Deleuze's work on the cinematic image to propose that Martel's sensorial approach, which is similar to Pasolini's prior extension of the literary technique of free indirect discourse to filmmaking, estranges established cinematic norms by foregrounding the circulation of queer desires.

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Amado, in her study of *La ciénaga*, offers a particularly compelling vision of this process, proposing to view the film in terms of a figure of precipitation that, like gravity exerting its pull, "parece arrastrar a todo y a todos hacia abajo" ("Velocidades" 51). She explains that

> En *La ciénaga* la precipitación, la caída, se hace forma ficcional, en la medida en que todos los procedimientos narrativos buscan plegarse al desenlace de la ley de la gravedad. Y se convierte a la vez en la alegoría de la ficción, una alegoría que se expande desde el título del film a la imagen del cenagal que aspira sin remedio a humanos y animales. (51)

This figure of precipitation is epitomized by the characters' descent into horizontal positions during their frequent naps and rest periods: we perceive them descending into bed as "testimonios sociales y politicos del presente," whose horizontality at once contrasts with the "cuerpos verticales y resistentes a la ley de la gravedad" of the Latin American cinema of the 1970s, and marks their belonging to a "mundo que se ha derrumbado" (52). And, as Amado notes, this downward precipitation also functions as an allegory of Martel's cinema: their descending bodies trace a fictional form, and precipitation is not only a movement captured by the camera, but also a narrative procedure. In this sense, following the line of inquiry opened in the second part of this essay, if "estos cuerpos de Martel no comunican utopías sino pura derrota" (52), this pure defeat, visualized in figures of precipitation, might also be extended to art cinema, its techniques for breaking down and renewing viewers' perception, and its narrative of estrangement.[16]

To clarify this point of view, I would like to conclude by turning to a recent essay in which Rei Terada studies how another art filmmaker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, declared the pure defeat of his own movies of the early 1970s. In a 1975 essay titled "Abiura [Repudiation]," which was originally published as a preface to an edition of the scripts of his *Trilogy of Life* series of historical films, Pasolini repudiates the very movies whose scripts he is publishing. In particular, he repudiates their ciphering of the potential for political renewal in what Terada, following Pasolini's own commentaries, describes as the "sensuous presentations of the vitality of the poor" (144). By the time Pasolini writes "Repudiation," the hopes that he had placed in a renewed sexual culture of proletarian youth have collapsed, giving way to a bleak panorama in which the degraded present encompasses a past that is now conceived, in a brutally negative light, as the prehistory of this fallen present. As Pasolini puts it: "[i]f those who were then so and so, have been able to become now thus and so, it means that they were potentially such already then; therefore, also their way of being then is devalued by the present … The collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past" (qtd. in Terada 144). As Terada explains, Pasolini's repudiation is grounded in his perception that the very concept in which he had previously ciphered his hopes, the modern political concept of *il popolo* or the people, now seems to have been an illusion: the modernization of nation-states such as Italy canceled out the potential for renewal from the outset because, as Terada puts it, "The people could exist only if peoples with actual distinctions worth debating still survived; but the peoples were destroyed so that the abstract universalized citizenry, the people, could take their place" (149).[17] In "Repudiation," Pasolini attempts to "render a world that is dead interpersonally, sexually, and anthropologically" (147), and, rather than striving to recuperate vital remnants of the past that would resist this unacceptable state and preserve some sort of hope for the future, he insists on accepting the unacceptable: even if a new people ought to emerge, it does not.

Terada contrasts Pasolini's position in "Repudiation" to what she describes as the "late modern" position occupied by scholars such as Georges Didi-Huberman, who when reading another essay by Pasolini from the same period that studies the disappearance of fireflies in Italy,

16. See Schwarzböck (2015) for a study of recent Argentine aesthetic production from a standpoint of pure defeat, in which the triumph of the neoliberal project of the military dictatorship marks the eclipse of the left-wing dreams of the twentieth century.

17. Ben Lawton, the English translator of "Repudiation," helpfully notes: "Pasolini uses the term '*il popolo*' for which there is no exact English-language equivalent. He is referring to subproletarians, peasants, and, perhaps, proletarians who have not been corrupted by bourgeois values" (Pasolini xx, footnote).

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"wants to say that the fireflies are potentially alive and the political [is] a possibility to be recovered" (149), and Deleuze, who in his books on cinema argues that the great filmmakers of the twentieth century, by laying bare the absence of the people, also "call a new people to come into being" (158). Pasolini argues instead that there could never have been a people, that there never can be a people, and that all that is left is acceptance of the unacceptable state of things. As he puts it in the final section of his essay: "I am adapting myself to the degradation and I am accepting the unacceptable. I am maneuvering to rearrange my life" (Pasolini, qtd. in Terada, 145). Terada proposes that Pasolini makes his final film, Salò, from the standpoint of this acceptance: its graphic depictions of violence, torture, and sexual abuse "[ask] us to look at nullity" and "insist on the contradiction: the unthinkable is the case, and we are thinking it" (159).

Terada's study of Pasolini's "Repudiation" provides a final means of elaborating the standpoint of pure defeat that Amado encounters in *La ciénaga*—a defeat which, as this essay has proposed, also threatens to encompass art cinema and of Martel's films. The unthinkable, following the line of inquiry pursued here, is also the thought of the collapse of estrangement as the crisis narrative that, for the past century and beyond, has generated a point of view for comprehending how works of art participate in the processes of becoming through which new forms of perception, or new peoples, emerge. If Martel's films have often been understood to successfully enact a renewal of estrangement at the turn of the twenty-first century, they also reflect on the failure of estrangement as a critical concept that, like Pasolini's concept of the people, was exposed in the last decades of the twentieth century to the sorts of unthinkable premises investigated by "Repudiation" and the movies of the *Salta Trilogy*.

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