

Monstrous Desire in Samanta Schweblin's and Claudia Llosa's *Distancia de rescate*

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Abstract

Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's most recent feature is the Netflix-produced *Distancia de rescate* (2021), an adaptation of Argentine Samanta Schweblin's eponymous novel. Both the original text and the English-language translation by Megan McDowell, titled *Fever Dream*, were widely praised by readers from around the world. Since its publication in 2014, literary critics have written prolifically about the novel, hailing it as a psychological thriller that illustrates the ecological horrors of twenty-first-century climate change and its consequences for daily life. Yet there has been a remarkable lack of scholarly attention to the "mutual fascination" between the fictional Amanda and Carla, two young mothers who meet when Amanda arrives for a family holiday in the Argentine countryside (Schweblin 12). Informed by Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine, I argue that Llosa's distinctive directorial style, in conjunction with cinematography by Spaniard Óscar Faura, makes conspicuous what readers may have overlooked in Schweblin's novel. In the film, viewers cannot escape Carla's beauty nor can they deny Amanda's attraction to her. I invite readers and spectators alike to acknowledge the existence of Amanda's desire for Carla, and to consider how that desire relates to her own fate as well as that of her young daughter.

Key Words: Argentina, Samanta Schweblin, Claudia Llosa, homoerotic desire, monstrous-feminine

Introduction to *Distancia de rescate*

Peruvian director Claudia Llosa's intimate filmmaking style centers the stories of compelling female protagonists in works like *Madeinusa* (2006), *La teta asustada* (2009), and *Aloft* (2014). Llosa's most recent feature is the Netflix-produced *Distancia de rescate* (2021), an adaptation of Argentine Samanta Schweblin's eponymous novel. Readers from around the world widely praised both the original text (2014) and the English-language translation by Megan McDowell, titled *Fever Dream* (2017). Since its first publication, literary critics have written prolifically about the novel, hailing it as a psychological thriller that illustrates the ecological horrors of twenty-first-century climate change and its consequences for daily life. What has not been sufficiently addressed is the presence of female desire in the novel. There has been a remarkable lack of scholarly attention to the "mutua fascinación" between the fictional Amanda and Carla, two young mothers who meet when Amanda arrives for a family holiday in the Argentine countryside (Schweblin 12). In this study, I argue that Llosa's distinctive directorial style, in conjunction with cinematography by Spaniard Óscar Faura, makes conspicuous what readers may have overlooked in Schweblin's novel. On screen, viewers cannot escape Carla's beauty nor can they deny Amanda's attraction to her (note: Carla becomes Carola in Llosa's adaptation¹). I invite readers and spectators alike to acknowledge the existence of Amanda's desire for Carla/Carola and to consider how that desire relates to her own fate as well as that of her young daughter.

Barbara Creed's foundational work on the monstrous-feminine serves as the theoretical basis for my examination of the literary and cinematic versions of *Distancia de rescate*. Creed maintains that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (7). The mothers in this film are not presented as monstrous in the way the town's poisoned children are: they are healthy, intelligent, and physically attractive. They are, however, attributed with the horror that befalls their offspring, due to both their parental neglect and the fact that their "bodies represent a fearful and threatening form of sexuality" (3). Creed's work serves as a vehicle for approaching Amanda (María Valverde) and Carola's (Dolores Fonzi's) homoerotic relationship, a relationship that, while undoubtedly present on the page, blossoms in Llosa's film adaptation.

I propose that what makes *Distancia de rescate* a horror film vis-à-vis Creed is the monstrous nature of Amanda and Carola's desire. Horror films have the potential to "separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In this sense, signifying horror involves a representation of, and a reconciliation with, the maternal body" (Creed 14). Amanda and Carola's attraction to each other leads them to neglect their children, a horror that is not secondary to but rather on par with the ecological threat of agrottoxins poisoning their community. In both the novel and the film, the mothers' mutual desire threatens the stability of a symbolic order that demands they dedicate their full attention to protecting their children at all times; when they put their own impulses ahead of the maternal abnegation demanded of them, not only do their children suffer consequences, they too must be punished for their "attempt to escape from patriarchal domination" (Subero 113).

With respect to Schweblin's novel in particular, Paulina Palmer's concept of lesbian Gothic informs my interpretation of a text that has been read predominantly through the lens of ecocriticism as a sort of cautionary tale emblematic of twenty-first-century ecogothic fiction. Close examination of *Distancia de rescate* makes clear that the desire between the fictional Amanda and Carla, perhaps subtle at first, is

1. For the remainder of this study, I refer to Schweblin's character as Carla and to Llosa's as Carola. When not distinguishing between the two, I include both names, Carla/Carola.

indeed present and sustained throughout.² I therefore approach the novel as a text that, like those Palmer analyzes, “recast[s] Gothic conventions in order to investigate the oppressed position of women who form primary relationships with members of their own sex and to represent the transgressive effects of lesbian desire” (“Genre” 128).

Existing Scholarship on *Distancia de rescate*

In Schwebelin’s novel, Spaniard Amanda, her husband, and daughter Nina rent a vacation house in the Argentine countryside, where mother and child spend their days outdoors while the father is working nearby. In this idyllic space, they meet Carla, ten years Amanda’s senior but “tanto más hermosa” (15), and her husband Omar, a struggling horse breeder. The couple live on a neighboring farm with their nine-year-old son David, who as a toddler was contaminated by streamwater that also poisoned a prize stallion Omar was breeding on their land. After she realized David had been contaminated, Carla rushed her son to a local healer, known as “la mujer de la casa verde” (23), in hopes of preventing his death. In order to save the child, the healer performed a sort of transmigration in which she split David’s spirit—and thereby the poison—into two bodies. The narrative takes shape via nonlinear conversations between Amanda and David, as Amanda lies dying in a hospital from exposure to the same agrotoxins that had infected the boy years earlier. Amanda, whose illness manifests as if worms have taken over her body, tries to identify for David “el punto exacto en el que nacen los gusanos” (11). The boy implores her to remember “las cosas importantes” (38), suggesting that what is really important is the exact moment at which Amanda was contaminated and interrupting her when she strays off-topic. Amanda’s memories, however, repeatedly return to her fascination with Carla and her constant preoccupation with Nina’s safety.

Academic scholarship on *Distancia de rescate* focuses primarily on the ecological horror of living in a modern-day rural Argentina ravaged by industrial agriculture. Thus, the novel has been ascribed to microgenres like “Anthropocene fiction” and “environmental gothic.” In fact, Allison Eleanor Mackey calls it “a gothic, anti-pastoral example of what Gisela Heffes identifies as the ‘rural turn’ to non-urban spaces in Argentine novels of the second decade of the twenty-first century” (6). Various scholars grapple with the ever-present anxiety and uncertainty that arise when exposure to toxins is commonplace and disaster is imminent (see, for example, Mutis, McConnell, and Salva), as well as posthumanism and the Anthropocene more broadly (Ferebee, Mackey), and the narrative aspects and strategies that distinguish Schwebelin’s treatment of these themes (De Leone, Heffes, Pindel, Oreja Garralda). In particular, analysis often centers on the anxious mothers and monstrous children that inhabit this toxic space (Cárdenas Sánchez and Parra Londoño, Sánchez, Forttes, González Dinamarca), without exploring the homoerotic subtext that links the two.³ Reviews by literary critics in some of the world’s most acclaimed publications similarly approach the novel, praising the treatment of the ecological components and familial entanglements of *Distancia de rescate* without addressing the desire between Amanda and Carla. Ellie Robins of the *LA Times*, for example, calls the novel “destabilizing,” “a deeply Argentine work,” “a novel about childless parents and parentless children, about split identities and living on land you can’t trust” (Robins). Carlos Pardo of *El País* calls the text an “inteligente variación del tópico del ‘monstruo exterior igual a monstruo interior’” but refers to only “dos posibles lecturas de su novela” (Pardo). And while Jia Tolentino in *The New Yorker* mentions that “a low, sick thrill took hold of me as I read it,” she too avoids the visceral desire between the two female protagonists to hail Schwebelin’s narrative as “so enigmatic and so disciplined that the book feels as if it belongs to a new literary genre altogether” (Tolentino).

2. The lack of critical commentary on Amanda and Carla’s mutual attraction itself warrants further scrutiny. See Palmer’s work, which builds on the original scholarship of Terry Castle, on lesbian desire as culturally invisible.

3. This is in no way meant to be an exhaustive list of the scholarship on *Distancia de rescate*.

Elsa Drucaroff's brief reflection on *Distancia de rescate* is one of the few to address the subversive nature of the attraction between Amanda and Carla in Schweblin's novel. Drucaroff points out that, just moments before Amanda and Nina are contaminated by the agrottoxins, Amanda actually voiced her maternal desire: a desire not to be a mother nor desire to love or protect her child. On the contrary, "el deseo de la madre es deseo de persona [...] Amanda ama a su hija pero también desea – casi imperceptiblemente – a otra mujer. Su mirada/voz narra a Carla con un erotismo intenso, velado y sutil" (5). Drucaroff proceeds to cite the passage in which Amanda visits Carla at Sotomayor's farm and, as she watches the soy plants around them, she imagines not leaving Carla but rather running off on a beach vacation with her:

—Carla —digo.

La soja se inclina ahora hacia nosotras. Imagino que dentro de unos minutos me alejaré [...]. Dejaré el pueblo y año tras año elegiré otro tipo de vacaciones, vacaciones en el mar y muy lejos de este recuerdo. Y ella vendría conmigo, eso creo, que Carla vendría si yo se lo propusiera, sin más que sus carpetas y lo que lleva puesto. Cerca de mi casa compraríamos otra bikini dorada [...]. (Schweblin 84, quoted in Drucaroff 5)

For Drucaroff, this maternal desire is the most radical aspect of the novel, the transgression that merits punishment due to its scandalous violation of phallogocentrism and patriarchal culture (5-6). Meanwhile, the most egregious transgression of a phallogocentric society, she suggests, is its refusal to care for the planet, a sort of "repetición ciega de lo que hace con sus madres, su negado origen, su primer hogar" (6).

Atilio R. Rubino and Silvina Sánchez expand on Drucaroff's argument in their comparative analysis of *Distancia de rescate* and Schweblin's 2012 short story "Conservas." While they acknowledge the interpretation of the novel as an eco-dystopian narrative, they employ a "sex-dissident perspective" to promote a more nuanced reading: "the non-heteronormative desire among the protagonists as an escape from the imperatives of motherhood and care, which becomes fantastic from the heteropatriarchal perspective" (108). Informed by the work of Sarah Ahmed and Lee Edelman, Rubino and Sánchez emphasize that the lack of heterosexual reproduction in Schweblin's texts threatens the heteronormative concept of the "happy family" and the promise of reproductive futurism (109-110). Using examples of the gold bikini as the locus of Amanda's desire for Carla, they show that Amanda's "dissident sexual desire" leads her to neglect the *distancia de rescate* and the "natural" bond between mother and child (122). She fails to sacrifice herself completely for her daughter's needs, pursuing pleasure and meaning through her developing relationship with Carla, which Rubino and Sánchez describe as "un pecado que debe ser castigado" (123). They also point out that what allows Amanda and Carla's lesbian attraction to flourish is the absence of their husbands, which converts their situation into a sort of utopia when considered from a sex-dissident perspective (123).

In what follows, I highlight various ways in which Amanda and Carla/Carola's mutual attraction is represented on the page and on screen. Moreover, I build on Drucaroff's and Rubino and Sánchez's analyses to propose that Amanda's lesbian desire is precisely what causes her daughter's monstrosity. Although Amanda did not give birth to a monstrous child, her desire for Carla/Carola prompts her to neglect Nina, which leads to the girl's contamination, which in turn results in her monstrosity. The desire to form a makeshift family amongst themselves—that is, a family that disrupts the patriarchal order in its violation of reproductive futurism (Rubino and Sánchez 123)—results in

a dystopian nightmare in which, I argue, maternal failure gives rise to monstrous children and ecological disaster.⁴

Distancia de rescate: On the Page and On Screen

Schweblin has called *Distancia de rescate* a novel written in extreme close-up: “desde la primera, primerísima persona, de punta a punta... Pasa en la cabeza de una mujer” (quoted in Benavides). Claudia Llosa, then, is the perfect auteur to tell this story on screen. Her aesthetic draws heavily on close-range cinematography to capture emotion, as well as long shots that engender a distinct sense of place for her predominantly female characters. In fact, her major works—*Madeinusa*, *La teta asustada*, *Aloft*, and the short film *Loxoro* (2011)—all feature complicated mother-child relationships, as does *Distancia de rescate*. Moreover, Llosa began to center openly LGBTQ characters in her Teddy Award-winning *Loxoro*, which depicts the bond between a travesti mother and daughter and transgender kinship in Lima, Peru (see Cornejo). Although Schweblin had received various offers to adapt her novel, Llosa was the filmmaker to convince her that they should tell the story together (*CultoLT*). In an interview with *La tercera*, Schweblin affirmed that “La mirada de un director siempre es una relectura del libro,” and she discussed the precision with which she and Llosa approached the film:

Con Claudia lo pensábamos todo, hasta el vaso que se veía en el fondo de la cocina de Amanda. Todo estaba tan pensado, que llegar al set y ver la casa de Amanda es brutal. Es muy fuerte. Está aquí. Es real y ya no es mío. Es algo que ahora les pertenece a todos. (*CultoLT*)

What results is an on-screen adaptation that not only demonstrates the depth of collaboration between novelist and director, but also evinces the unique contributions of Schweblin’s and Llosa’s individual styles.

Throughout the film, Llosa illuminates the relationship between Amanda (María Valverde) and Carola (Dolores Fonzi) via frequent close-ups and detail shots of the two women. This meticulously shot portrayal keeps viewers’ attention on the protagonists, rather than what is going on around them. In fact, there is little screen time devoted to their children, Amanda’s daughter Nina (Guillermina Sorribes Liotta) and Carola’s son David (Emilio Vodanovich), and almost none to their husbands. By staying hyperfocused on Amanda and Carola, Llosa enables viewers to immerse themselves in the budding relationship between the two, as well as their experience attempting to raise children in an environment that is ever more isolating and threatening to their survival.

Just as literary scholars have primarily neglected to examine the same-sex desire in the novel, there is a noticeable dearth of analysis of Amanda and Carola’s attraction in Llosa’s adaptation. One critic calls the film “una película conjugada en femenino, con dirección, guion e interpretación hecha por mujeres,” without mentioning the desire between the female characters (Rubio Pobes 116). Another alludes to their sexual chemistry without engaging in further analysis: “Casi desde el inicio, se observa una atracción mutua entre ambas jóvenes madres, Amanda y Carola, que se mantiene pese a sus distintos enfoques de vida y sobre la maternidad” (Beteta). Yet the film’s tagline itself hints at Amanda’s obsession with Carola, even before the action begins. The movie poster features a close-up of Amanda’s face in profile as she lies dying, and the tagline that appears below—“Hay que estar atento,” or “Pay attention” in English-language promotional materials—employs a tone that is both warning and scolding. The film’s tagline thus presages Amanda’s wandering focus, alerting viewers to her lack of regard for “what really matters:” her motherly duties.

4. I support Rubino and Sánchez’s (among others’) assertion that the moment of “fracaso materno” is when Amanda cannot/does not save Nina from contamination by agrottoxins (120).

Llosa introduces both Amanda and Carola in the form of detail shots. We first see Amanda's ear, then her mouth with lips and teeth in profile in a somewhat sensual image, followed by an extreme close-up of her eye with a single tear. We first see Carola's bare feet walking across a yard, then a glance of her shins fluttering in a swimming pool, followed by a shot of her hair and shoulders, then her thighs, all before she turns her head and we finally see her face in profile [00:02:00].⁵ In Schweblin's novel, Amanda recalls this afternoon together: "[Carla] Se cuelga la cartera al hombro y se aleja en su bikini dorada hasta el coche. Hay algo de mutua fascinación entre nosotras, y en contraste, breves lapsos de repulsión, puedo sentirlos en situaciones muy precisas" (12). Llosa transforms this encounter on screen, thanks in large part to the embodiment of Carola as a blond bombshell who is at once relatable and inscrutable. In the words of musician and director Fito Paez, "Es muy difícil no enamorarse de Dolores Fonzi. ¿Cómo haces? Hombre, mujer, travesti, planta, lo que coño seas. Te enamoras, punto" (Larrea and Balmaceda). Fonzi's Carola stuns the viewer; she is magnificent, and she elicits desire that we not only see but also hear through Amanda's breathy voice. If there were any uncertainty, the camera cuts to a close-up of Amanda's eyes as she intently watches Carola [00:02:09]. The scene ends with Amanda turning to check on Nina in what I interpret as a premonition that her attraction to Carola could threaten her daughter's safety by distracting her and physically distancing herself from her child.

Despite its early position in the novel and the film, this is not the first encounter, chronologically speaking, between the two mothers. Amanda, in response to David's insistent questioning, recalls the first time she saw Carla: "Me gustó [Carla] desde el principio, desde el día en que la vi cargando los dos grandes baldes de plástico bajo el sol, con su gran rodete pelirrojo y su jardinero de jean" (14). Towards the end of the novel, Amanda again remembers the first time she saw Carla:

Era alta y delgada, y aunque cargaba con el peso de un balde a cada lado, ahora aparentemente llenos, avanzaba erguida y elegante. Sus sandalias doradas dibujaron una línea caprichosamente recta, como si estuviera ensayando algún tipo de paso o de movimiento. (100)

Llosa's on-screen interpretation of the women's initial meeting veers somewhat from the original text. Although the director respects the essence of Amanda's memory, she chooses to depict Carola as a short woman (at 5'2" Fonzi is several inches shorter than Valverde) with luscious blond curls in a close-fitting denim sundress, and she adds Amanda's comment that Carola is like a vision ("es como una aparición," [00:07:03]). Llosa's Carola does not replicate Schweblin's Carla, with "sus blusas coloridas y su gran rodete en la cabeza" (29), but she does wear gold sandals and large gold jewelry to reflect the sophistication Amanda mentions in the text, a quality that makes Carla/Carola "tan simpática, distinta y ajena a todo lo que la rodeaba" (29).

Throughout the movie, the camera discloses a number of private moments between the two women, which permit the viewer to vicariously gaze upon Carola's face, body, and belongings from Amanda's point of view. In an early scene in Amanda's car, we see Carola's elegant arms and red nails waving outside the window, as we hear Amanda in voiceover: "Me acuerdo del movimiento de su mano en el auto. Sus brazos, el ruido de sus pulseras. El perfume de su protector solar cuando se mueve en el asiento" [00:08:30]. Later in the film, Llosa's attention to detail exposes the viewer to Amanda carefully examining the objects in Carola's purse and applying her lipstick, pausing on a sensuous extreme close-up of her mouth. Another example appears after Amanda becomes infected by agrottoxins, when

5. Timestamps are given in hours, minutes, and seconds for the approximate time the relevant quotation, conversation, or scene begins on the original film version, available via Netflix's streaming platform.

Carola takes her to rest at the farmhouse she shares with David and Omar (Germán Palacios). As she lies in Carola's bed, Amanda caresses the older woman's bracelets on the bedside table. While the fragmentation caused by detail shots can be employed to objectify the female body, I argue that Llosa's close-range shots emphasize Amanda's agency and humanize her fascination with Carola. Intimate camerawork also captures Amanda's desire in a scene in which the women take their children to play at the river. Here, the detail shots do not disempower Carola, rather they communicate her ability to command Amanda's attention. The camera tilts up the length of Carola's body, ending in a low-angle shot that clearly illustrates her psychological power over Amanda. Throughout Schwebelin's novel, Amanda's desire is evident in her descriptions of Carla's appearance, her scent, the movement of her hands, but the sensual nature of her memories is even more vivid on screen thanks to Llosa's painstaking direction and Faura's photography.

In the novel, we begin to suspect that Amanda's attraction to Carla might become destructive the first time she abandons her commitment to the *distancia de rescate* that she usually maintained between herself and her daughter. Amanda explains: "Lo llamo 'distancia de rescate', así llamo a esa distancia variable que me separa de mi hija y me paso la mitad del día calculándola, aunque siempre arriesgo más de lo que debería" (22). Her neglect of the rescue distance follows Carla's account of rushing David to the green house, the home of a local spiritual healer, after the boy was contaminated. Carla described the emergency intervention to Amanda as follows: "La trasmigración se llevaría el espíritu de David a un cuerpo sano, pero traería también un espíritu desconocido al cuerpo enfermo. Algo de cada uno quedaría en el otro" (28). Even though Amanda considers Carla's beliefs to be "una gran barbaridad" (28), she fixates on her friend's tale and convinces herself that she must find the green house in order to "medir el peligro" and calculate the rescue distance needed to keep Nina safe (44). Amanda thus abandons her sleeping daughter to go in search of the building and, when she returns from her walk, an anxious Carla is waiting, fearful that David is alone in the summer house with Nina. Realizing the possible consequences of her actions on her daughter, Amanda has "una espantosa sensación de fatalidad" and tells herself "Tengo que alejarme de esta mujer" (47, 48). Once they discover that Nina is safe, Amanda shouts at Carla, "estás completamente loca" (50), failing to acknowledge that she herself had bought into Carla's "locura" (50) by wandering in search of the green house.

While the novel hints at the danger inherent in Amanda's fascination with Carla, in the film adaptation, Llosa more explicitly links Amanda's negligence to her desire to be with the older woman. Amanda leaves Nina alone with a caregiver for the first time, so that she and Carola can take a day trip without their children. Again, we glimpse Carola's glorious hair, her hands out the window, and the women's physical proximity in the front seat as Amanda teaches her friend to drive. Amanda hits her head when Carola slams on the brakes, and when Carola reaches over to check on Amanda, the gesture results in another charged moment between the two [00:51:39]. After they get out of the car, the camera lingers on a wistful Amanda as we hear Carola's voice say, "si hubieras llegado antes a mi vida" [00:52:27]. Like the flash of genuine concern on Carola's face when her friend hit her head, here we see that Carola too is drawn to Amanda. Amanda is shot with a shallow depth of focus, in natural lighting and with the wind in her hair, and we begin to understand that the attraction is indeed mutual. They spend the rest of the day swimming and sunbathing, lounging in their underwear on the bank of the river, and the cinematography makes it difficult to dismiss their mutual affection for one another. María Mutis contends that the novel's idyllic setting "inverts the traditional association of the countryside retreat as a space of leisure and recreation to one of oppression and mortality" (42), and while I

certainly agree with this assertion, it is worth noting that that Llosa manages to create a cinematic space imbued with vitality and desire, despite the dangers lurking in the rural landscape.

A second indication that Amanda's attraction is perilous resides in her insistence on saying goodbye to Carla/Carola before leaving town with Nina. In the novel, Amanda decides she doesn't want to be at the vacation house anymore, because the rescue distance "está ahora tan tensa que no creo que pueda separarme más de unos pocos metros de mi hija. La casa, los alrededores, todo el pueblo me parece un sitio inseguro y no hay ninguna razón para correr riesgos" (53). She does take a risk, though, and heads towards the Sotomayor farm where Carla works. There, Amanda and Nina sit outside in the grass waiting for Carla to appear. This is "the moment" that David warned us about and, paradoxically, it transpires when Amanda is in Nina's immediate vicinity. Mother and daughter both realize that their clothes and bodies are soaked, but Amanda insists that it is dew that will dry as they walk with Carla to her husband's nearby stables (64). Amanda remembers this walk as "un momento casi perfecto" (67), and begins to doubt her decision to leave. Nina runs off to explore the property, and Amanda's thoughts are again interrupted by the image of Carla in her bikini: "Dónde están sus breteles dorados, pienso. Carla es linda. Tu mamá, es muy linda, y hay algo en el recuerdo de esos breteles que me enternece" (69). While Amanda and Carla are deep in conversation, Nina is playing near a well and attempts to catch her mother's attention, but Amanda focuses solely on Carla. Later, Amanda will admit to David that she feels the rescue distance contract as she realizes that Nina does not trust Carla (85), likely as a result of Amanda ignoring her daughter's complaints that her hands were burning after playing at the well.

In the film adaptation of Amanda's departure, and in turn "the moment," she divulges to David that she needs to apologize for having yelled at Carola the day before. As Amanda drives to the office at Sotomayor's farm, the camera pans across workers spraying pesticides in the soybean fields. Amanda and Nina sit in the grass outside the building, waiting for Carola to come out, when Nina notices that her dress is wet. Amanda dismisses the child's concern, saying "Es rocío, mi amor" [01:06:20]. As Nina gets up and runs from view, Amanda's voiceover informs us that "Nunca la había visto [a Carola] con su uniforme. Me distrae por un momento" [01:06:40]. Just like in the novel, Amanda is watching Carola, not watching her daughter. While Amanda tells Carola that they are leaving for Spain and asks for forgiveness, a backlit long-shot distracts our focus from the industrial space and highlights the beauty and tenderness of this exchange. In the novel, what follows is the friends' conversation as they walk to the stables. Llosa, however, adapts the subsequent sequence into a sort of breakup scene. The women's facial expressions, body language, and positioning in a field drenched in toxic chemicals hint at the finality of their time together. Their conversation resembles a lovers' quarrel more than a poignant conversation between friends. Carola admits: "Hace tiempo que no pienso en lo que quiero. Que solo pienso en lo que hubiera querido [...] ¿Vos pensás que no fantaseo con irme? ¿Con empezar otra vida? ¿Con tener a alguien que cuidar y que se deje?" In response to Amanda's retort, "¿Y eso qué tiene que ver?", Carola says defeatedly, "Que no vas a volver, Amanda" [01:08:16].

In Schweblin's novel, Amanda returns time and again to Carla's sensuality: her arms, her legs, her hair, her movements, the way she smells, the sound of her clinking bracelets. Although she is in an altered state, Amanda's obsession with Carla is evident in both the quantity and quality of the memories she shares with David.⁶ Yet there is also textual evidence—albeit narrated from Amanda's perspective—of Carla's reciprocated attraction. For example, in one of Amanda's many

6. Other noteworthy examples include: "Está descalza y con su bikini dorada [...] siempre me acuerdo de Carla descalza" (90); "Tu madre se desarma el rodete del pelo, usa las manos como dos grandes peinetas, los dedos finos abiertos y estirados [...] Se airea el pelo con un gesto distraído" (95); "Se siente en la cama, muy cerca. Otra vez el perfume dulce del protector solar [...] Y el ruido de sus pulseras" (111).

references to her friend's gold bikini, she adds: "cuando se mueve en el asiento el perfume de su protector solar también se mueve en el coche. Ahora me doy cuenta, ella hace el gesto adrede, es ella la que deja caer el bretel" (77-78). Near the end of the novel, Carla's attentive treatment of Amanda suggests that her feelings are indeed requited. As soon as she finds out Amanda was taken to the emergency clinic, Carla rushes to visit (109-110), and when Amanda asks her friend to call her husband, Carla responds with urgency: "Carla prácticamente corre hacia mí. Me agarra las manos, me pregunta cómo estoy" (110). When it becomes clear that Amanda will not recover, Carla performs a final act of love by trying to save Nina through a transmigration, as she once had done for her own child.

In Llosa's adaptation, the camerawork animates the images that Amanda repeatedly recounts in her dialogue with David, and for much of the film, the young mother's desire for her new friend is palpable. The camera primarily portrays Carola from Amanda's point of view, emphasizing Carola's physical beauty as well as her magnetism. Yet just as we see glimpses of Carla's feelings for Amanda in Schweblin's narrative, we also witness Carola's affection for Amanda in Llosa's film. In a previously mentioned scene, for example, Carola shows concern when Amanda hits her head, and reveals her wish that Amanda had come into her life sooner. Further evidence of Carola's devotion to Amanda appears towards the end of the film, beginning with the aforementioned breakup conversation. We hear the dejection in Carola's voice as she discusses Amanda's departure. Then, once Amanda has been infected and starts to show signs of illness, Carola again attempts to comfort her via a physically intimate gesture. We learn through Amanda's voiceover that "[Carola] Me acomoda el pelo y sus dedos están helados. Pero es un placer" [01:11:30]. Shortly thereafter, Carola takes Amanda and Nina into her own home to care for them as they grow weaker and, once Carola realizes that mother and daughter both have been poisoned, she makes a final grand gesture of trying to save Nina by rushing her to the green house, heeding Amanda's earlier plea that "No dejes sola a Nina" [01:10:27].

Monstrous Desire in *Distancia de rescate*

Numerous scholars have expounded upon the gothic elements, both stylistic and thematic, of Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (e.g. Mutis, Forttes, Mackey, etc.). Mutis, for one, classifies the short novel more specifically as environmental gothic, due in part to the fact that it "calls on the maternal instinct and the protector function of the mother to give us the drama of environmental destruction within a maternal discourse" (43). For Sandra Casanova-Vizcaíno and Inés Ordiz, the novel is a quintessential example of contemporary Latin American Gothic that "tackles issues of environmental degradation using an intensely claustrophobic mode of narration which reproduces gothic tropes such as the anxieties of motherhood, fear of death, the possibility of life after it, and the interconnection of present and past" (44).

I propose, however, a re-reading of *Distancia de rescate* that extends beyond previous discussions of gothic horror to examine the novel through the lens of Paulina Palmer's concept of lesbian Gothic. In her pivotal text *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999), Palmer draws on work of theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler to approach lesbian subjectivity and the abject in late-twentieth-century novels that she ascribes to this new sub-genre. Palmer claims that one of the defining features of these narratives—"including ghost stories, vampire narratives, Gothic thrillers, and texts centering on the witch"—is their utilization of gothic motifs to explore lesbian subjectivity and experience ("Genre" 118). These motifs are certainly pertinent to an analysis of a novel that includes the transmigration of children's souls and a local (witch) healer who inhabits a mysterious green house, as is Palmer's discussion of the concept of excess as "a point of connection

between the two terms [Gothic and lesbian]" ("Genre" 118). I maintain, then, that the gothic provides a means for Schweblin to tackle not only ecological fears about environmental catastrophe and societal panic around maternal neglect, but also the monstrosity of female desire and excess that supposedly threatens the heteropatriarchy.

In addition to proposing a reading of Schweblin's novel as an example of lesbian gothic, I recommend a screening of Llosa's *Distancia de rescate* through the lens of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine. According to Creed, the horror film relies heavily on the trope of the maternal figure as abject, one who transgresses boundaries and threatens the stability of the symbolic order (11, 49). The horror film "attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human" (14). Rife with the psychological terror of being unable to protect one's child from the hidden dangers of modern life, *Distancia de rescate* is indeed a horror film. Creed's work enables another understanding of the film's horror as well, one that lies not in the monstrous children deformed by agrottoxins but in the monstrous desire between two women who are drawn to each other emotionally and physically. Amanda and Carola align with Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine because their relationship emerges at the border "which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (49).

For Creed, the concept of the monstrous-feminine "as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration" (2) and "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3). The "problem" of Amanda and Carola's difference is two-fold: it is simultaneously excessive and ambiguous. Their desire for one another "functions as excess in within the heterosexual economy" (Zimmerman 4), and it transgresses boundaries, both of their marriages and of a society that expects them to be singularly focused on protecting their children. Moreover, their mutual attraction leads to a relationship that is ambiguous and therefore abject and monstrous. For Kristeva, the abject lies in "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (3). If ambiguity makes women truly horrifying, then Amanda and Carola's ambiguity is especially monstrous: Are they hetero- or homosexual? Are they in committed marriages or plotting an affair? Are they watching their children or are they watching each other? Are they protectors or destroyers of the young lives they have created?

Amanda and Carla/Carola embody monstrosity differently than the poisoned and disfigured children of the town do. As Kelly Oliver has noted, "a beautiful woman or adorable child can be more terrifying, particularly in a pedestrian way, than a hideous monster because they are seemingly innocent and attractive; and they are more dangerous because they can pass themselves off as good when they are really evil" (125-126). Carola is especially dangerous, not only because of her beauty but also because she works at Sotomayor's farm and is therefore in close contact with the chemicals poisoning their children.

In similar fashion to Schweblin's novel, Llosa's film adaptation portrays an Amanda distracted by Carola's beauty, watching her friend instead of watching her daughter; in this way, the camera reflects Amanda's textual confession to David that "si yo realmente no me dejara engañar por los miedos de tu madre, nada de esto estaría pasando" (58). For much of the film, the cinematography captures Amanda's point of view as she longingly gazes upon various parts of Carola's body, but there are some scenes in which Carola is not sexualized. Most of these occur when Amanda is not looking at her, such as the sequences in which

Carola has flashbacks of caring for David in the days before he became infected, and later taking him to the healer at the green house. In fact, in the series of shots at the green house, Carola looks terrible: her clothes are soiled from carrying David through the woods, and her swollen eyes and disheveled hair reflect her exhaustion. Neither is she sexualized in the scenes between her and her husband. Carola is still attractive, yet she is not warmly lit, suggestively dressed, nor physically alluring as she is in the camerawork that represents Amanda's way of viewing her. In other words, Llosa's cinematic depiction of Amanda's gaze makes clear that she is "an abject creature not far removed from the animal world and one dominated totally by her feelings and reproductive functions" (Creed 47).

Left unattended by their husbands, Amanda and Carola not only seek pleasure in each other's company but also in the formation of their own sort of family unit that comprises the two of them and their children (Rubino and Sánchez 123). In this way, their same-sex desire is inextricable from motherhood, and they thus embody Creed's figure of the archaic mother: "She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. She is outside morality and the law" (Creed 27). In both the novel and the film, Carla/Carola controls the future of the children and functions as a "primeval mother [who] does not need the male as a 'father'" (28). She does not need Omar to save her son: she takes David's life—and later, Nina's—into her own hands, resorting to transmigration in order to preserve some semblance of the child(ren) she knew. In breaking from her traditional role as dependent on her husband, Carla/Carola manages to ensure "the continuation of the species" and therefore threaten "a patriarchal order that can never confine such power" (Oliver 125).

In the novel, Amanda reflects on her possible culpability in Nina's fate when she wonders, "¿Es porque hice algo mal? ¿Fui una mala madre? ¿Es algo que yo provoqué?" (116). Amanda perceives the threat to Nina too late to prevent harm, and she never fully admits her willingness to break the rescue distance when Carla is around nor accepts that her attraction to Carla is to blame. In choosing to disregard the rescue distance, Amanda precipitates her and her daughter's contamination by agrottoxins, which ultimately leads to her own death and Nina's partial displacement into someone else's body. While neither Amanda nor Carla may have given birth to monstrous children, their refusal to ignore their attraction to each other is directly linked to their children becoming monstrous.

Due to their mothers' supposed carelessness, Nina and David both are left motherless and both end up as "figures of abjection" like those that recur in horror films; the children are monstrous hybrid creatures like vampires or zombies (Creed 47-48), when they should be the picture of health and vitality. At least half of David's soul and half of Nina's has been transported to another body, a body that likely also shows physical symptoms of their poisoning. As monstrous children, they embody societal fear of the destruction of the traditional family (González Dinamarca 92). In horror films, a mother who cannot produce a healthy, "normal" child is terrifying, as is a mother who cannot protect her offspring. Yet it is an entirely different type of horror when a mother's excessive desire leads to her inability to fulfill the role of traditional, self-sacrificing parent. In both the literary and cinematic versions of *Distancia de rescate*, the mothers' lascivious behavior does not culminate in physical intimacy. Nonetheless, their desire is toxic, and much like the chemicals poisoning their natural resources, it "seep[s] and spread[s], transgressing boundaries and barriers we believe will keep them contained" (McConnell 13). In the process, it threatens the current safety of their own children, as well as the future well-being of rural Argentine families like their own.

For Catalina Alejandra Forttes, the most unsettling aspect of the novel is the inability of the mother to protect “la nueva vida” from the toxicity of soy monoculture that pervades the Argentine countryside (147, 149). She claims that “La madre, en esta novela, encarna el miedo ancestral de no ser capaz de ver, oler, sentir o intuir los peligros que acechan a la descendencia” (149), and while I do not reject this claim, I propose that the real danger is the mothers’ monstrous relationship. Their intimacy is at once excessive (with respect to desire), insufficient (in terms of protection), and ambiguous (crossing gender boundaries and roles). Amanda and Carla/Carola break “established mariana codes” and therefore must be destroyed (Subero 113). At the end of the novel and the film, Amanda dies and Carla/Carola abandons her family in search of a new life elsewhere. The film thus exemplifies Gustavo Subero’s assertion about a specific type of Latin American horror cinema: “By killing women whose behaviour has clearly challenged the basis of normativity, the films seem to reify the notion that traditional paradigms of female sexuality cannot be questioned or altered by female subjects unless they are willing to pay (with their own lives) for attempting to undermine patriarchal authority” (113).

In the last line of the novel, Amanda says of her husband: “No ve lo importante: el hilo finalmente suelto, como una mecha encendida en algún lugar; la plaga inmóvil a punto de irritarse” (124). She fails to add that the rope is slack precisely because she allowed herself to become distracted by Carla. Amanda’s last words of the film, however, suggest that she has begun to understand the connection between her behavior and the destruction that followed:

El hilo tira demasiado. ¿Es Nina? ¿Tira del hilo para encontrarme? Es como si me atara el estómago desde afuera. Lo aprieta. Lo parte. ¿Es porque no vi el peligro? La distancia de rescate. ¿Es eso lo que querías que viera? ... El hilo.
[01:21:05]

Conclusion

Throughout the novel and the film, David pushes Amanda to remember what is “important,” and a close reading of both texts substantiates that Amanda’s priorities are two-fold: fear for Nina’s safety and her attraction to Carla/Carola. These are two concerns, not one. David repeatedly rejects Amanda’s memories of Carla as not being “lo importante” (89) and minimizes Amanda’s longing to be near her. Previous studies of Schweblin’s novel address the invisible threats of toxic chemicals but, like David, ignore that the other invisible threat to Nina’s safety is indeed Amanda’s desire for Carla. The homoerotic subtext suggests that the mothers’ environment is not just unsustainable ecologically, it is also unsustainable personally because they cannot exist as fully realized individuals. The patriarchal familial structure that surrounds Amanda and Carla is oppressive, and a society that imposes unrealistic expectations for motherhood prevents these women from fulfilling their own desires and traps them in a cycle of frustration, fear, and impotence. So while literary critics concur that the novel’s horror lies in environmental threats and the mother’s inability to protect her child, I propose that horror is also found in this monstrous “fascination” between two mothers. The result is the same, regardless of how or why the mothers can’t save their children: both women abandon their children in the end, Amanda through her passing and Carla through fleeing from her husband and son.

In the surreal ending of both texts, Amanda and Carla/Carola are figuratively united as mothers. The woman from the green house “saves” Nina by migrating part of her spirit into David’s already divided, already monstrous body. Through their transmigration, boundary-crossing David and Nina are both figures of abjection, as is Carla/Carola, who is now a mother to both of the children who have merged inside

the boy's small frame. Pieces of Amanda and Carla/Carola have intermixed in one body, yet it is a body that Carla/Carola cannot tolerate and therefore abandons, presumably to return to the capital city. The monstrous-feminine has been "repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order" (Creed 70), and the bodies and divided spirits of the children are left for their seemingly oblivious fathers to handle. In making obvious the feminine desire that was present in the novel, Llosa's film enables a deeper understanding of Schweblin's representation of the mothers' relationship, which I read as a critique of a patriarchal Argentine society that is equally as fierce as the novel's rebuke of industrial agriculture.

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