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Contemporary Women Directors

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Response Paper 4: *La Ciénaga* (2001)

Lucrecia Martel & the New Argentinian Cinema

*La Ciénaga* means ‘The Swamp’ and it isn’t hard to understand the meaning of Lucrecia Martel’s film title after spending more than a few minutes inside this crumbling vacation home located in northern Argentina. The entire story is full of heat and sweat, mud and rain and a collage full of sticky, exhausted bed-ridden people, drunkenly and lazily squatting in the ruins of their slow rotting lives. This was a highly fascinating, well crafted film, but that doesn’t mean it was a particular enjoyable experience. The haunting images that Martel has crafted will stay with the viewer long after the film is over. Not surprisingly because of the meticulous and vivid detail, the vacation home and the colorful cast of characters came directly from memories that Martel had experienced early in her childhood.

*La Ciénaga* is less a traditional linear narrative and more a loose re-creation of living in the same cramped conditions as all the characters in the story. Just like everyday life the film doesn’t follow any formulaic structure, and you won’t find any crucial events, conflicts or even a rising climax. Things just periodically happen throughout the day, some events fit together, others do not, and there is even a potential death that goes unnoticed. There will be moments

throughout the film where the audience might even lose track on who is who and which family is which. While watching *La Ciénaga* the experience felt very similar to being invited to a large family reunion, when it isn't necessarily your family, and no one bothers to introduce themselves and show you around.

*La Ciénaga* is a tragic meditation on a once wealthy Argentinian family, now squabbling in their own pathetic ruins. Director Lucrecia Martel very well could be making a political commentary on the slow deterioration of the bourgeoisie family in Argentina, but one thing is for sure; this is a very sad, bleak film. Take for example the beginning sequence of the story: The opening shots show the aimless, unmotivated bodies of family members loitering around a dirty stagnant pool. Most of them seem drunk, especially the mother Mecha who staggers up to carry several wine glasses but not before she slips and falls down, seriously cutting herself with the glass. Does anyone immediately respond to her bloody accident? No. Most of them don't even acknowledge Mecha's body sprawled on the pavement while lying in her own blood. Her four children finally seem to notice and have to be the adults in the situation. Since all the other adults (mostly her unmotivated and extremely useless husband) are way too intoxicated to get behind the wheel, the children who aren't even old enough to have a driver's license, have to drive their mother to the hospital.

In the nearby town of La Ciénaga another story takes place involving Mecha's cousin Tali, her husband and her four children. The children are seen going hunting in the swamp, and disturbingly kill a cattle that seems to be stuck in the mud. This film is entirely full of potential accidents or inevitable tragic mistakes just waiting to happen. Whether it's an accidental shooting (one child seems to be already missing an eye) or the uncomfortable incestual tensions between various nieces, nephews and cousins. Many of them are oddly comfortable enough to

undress, shower and sleep merely right on top of one another. Mecha seems to be the one character throughout the assembled cast that stands out the most among the rest, mostly because of her nasty and racist insults to her beautiful servant who she constantly accuses of as being a thief. Just like her husband, Mecha is bedridden, constantly sipping wine and watching mindless television, all the while complaining and lashing out on her children while waiting for the cuts on her body to heal.

With *La Ciénaga*, Lucrecia Martel has created a cinematic experience full of fascinating rich images that are hard to shake away. I have always stated that I'd rather see a imperfect film that included images, emotions and moments that I have never seen or experienced before, then a well-crafted narrative in which the formula being used has been done a thousand times over in several other movies. For example, one of the many images I'll never forget in *La Ciénaga* is all the circulating fans moving back and forth to cool off the characters from the scorching heat. One small moment I enjoyed was the children speaking right up against the choppy sound of the fan blades. I remember doing that when I was a kid. For a second Lucrecia even brought me back to my own childhood, a strange little moment which for years I seemed to forget.