Elite in Crisis: The Marginalized as a Site of Resistance in *La ciénaga* and *Coronación*

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Abstract  
This study compares Lucrecia Martel’s *La ciénaga* (Argentina 2001) with Silvio Caiozzi’s *Coronación* (Chile 2000) in order to analyze how they represent the immediate pre-economic crisis in Argentina and the politico-military crisis in Chile. Through the analysis of these films, I show that the decadence of the elite and its properties stands in contrast to the resistance of Isabel and Estela, young, non-white domestic servants who reject sexual advances from their employers and ultimately leave with the help of their boyfriends. Although the young women have little hope of bettering their social situations, the films reveal a move toward a renewed focus on the working class as a site of resistance.

Keywords: Post-dictatorship, Southern Cone, Solidarity, Resistance, Marginalization

The turn of the millennium in Argentina and Chile witnessed significant political and economic events. The late 1990s and early 2000s in each country marked a weakening of structures set in place by the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, and continued by transitional governments. In Chile, a political crisis erupted in 1998, when a Spanish court issued an international warrant for the arrest of General Augusto Pinochet (Márquez Carrasco and Alcaide Fernández 692). Pinochet had participated in the 1973 coup d’état that overthrew Salvador Allende’s presidency under the pretense of restoring order to a Chile threatened by leftist militants and communism. During his seventeen year dictatorship, Pinochet oversaw the violent repression of dissidence as well as the implementation of neoliberal policies with the help of the Chicago Boys, U.S.-trained economists who had been educated according to Milton Friedman’s theories of the free market. Even after Chile’s return to democracy, Pinochet and other high-ranking members of the armed forces retained political influence not only through widespread concern in society that they might carry out another golpe de estado, but also through their presence as senators-for-life (Loveman 337, 349-59). The issuing of an international warrant for Pinochet’s arrest opened a chink in the military’s armor, and strengthened the position of Chilean organizations and individuals as they sought redress for human rights violations committed by the regime. Although Britain returned Pinochet for health reasons to Chile instead of extraditing him for trial to Spain (Lutz and Reiger 87), this event encouraged the filing of new cases and facilitated the ability to carry out trials against the dictatorship and its actors for human rights violations (Evans 244).

Argentina’s economic crisis of 2001-2002 had no less impact on politics and society. Though the histories of Argentina and Chile vary widely, a shared history of dictatorship during the 1970s and 1980s with similar repression and goals to liberalize the economy provide a basis for their comparison here. As with the political crisis in Chile, Argentina’s economic crisis opened fissures that provided space for opposition to post-dictatorship politics. In Argentina, however, free market policies were often the focus of this contestation. As under Chile’s dictatorship, Argentina’s *juntas* (1976-1983) also began to implement economic reforms according to neoliberal theory, but only under post-dictatorship President Carlos Ménem (1989-1999) did these reforms deepen and expand (Brennan 49). During the 1990s, Ménem’s government further liberalized the market by restructuring welfare, deregulating the market and privatizing state agencies (Villalón 140) such as Aerolíneas Argentinas, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales, and Telecom. Although Daniel Treisman notes that Ménem sometimes compromised neoliberal orthodoxy in order to maintain political ties (400), his administration generally attempted to follow its basic principles. The convertibility of the Argentine peso to the dollar was unsustainable, and by the late 1990s, Ménem’s neoliberal economic system had begun to show signs of wear. A banking system on the verge of collapse and the declaration of one of the greatest debt defaults in modern history by President Fernando de la Rúa’s administration (1999-2001) brought citizens into the streets in protest. De la Rúa fled the *Casa Rosada* amidst angry calls for his
resignation, and the following four interim presidents likewise ended their terms early (Brennan 49). Generalized discontent provided a basis for President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) to begin to dismantle certain vestiges of dictatorship and transitional policies, by promoting an economy that favored national as opposed to international capital and revoking amnesty laws for human rights violations by military and paramilitary actors of the regime.

In this article I discuss two films of this era and analyze how they represent society in pre-crisis Argentina and after the politico-military crisis in Chile. Lucrecia Martel’s La ciénaga (Argentina 2001) and Silvio Caiozzi’s Coronación (Chile 2000, based on José Donoso’s 1957 novel of the same title), reveal surprising similarities in spite of their production in countries with very different national histories and film traditions. The decadence of the elite in both films signals crisis in these societies, despite the former being provincial elites and the latter a wealthy Santiago family. However, not only do their depictions of the upper classes coincide, but they also represent certain characters’ escapes from oppressive elite spheres; fissures in dominant blocs and their inability to adapt to contemporary trends open limited space for the contestation of class norms. Elite decadence stands in contrast to the resistance of Isabel and Estela, young, non-white domestic servants who reject their employers’ sexual advances and ultimately leave. Though the girls have little hope of bettering their social situation, the films represent the working class as a site of solidarity through their escape from decadent elite spaces.

The decline of the elite is not a new trope in Latin American cultural production, yet this analysis shows how these marginalized characters challenge authority by reweaving the social fabric torn by military regimes and neoliberal capitalism. The Southern Cone dictatorships intentionally undermined social solidarity, but Manuel Antonio Garretón argues that the dictatorships “involved more than disarming, disarticulating, fragmenting, or repressing the opposition . . . Their plan was first to re-create the relations between the state and civil society in order to institute a nonredistributive, nonparticipatory brand of capitalism, and then to reinsert their respective economies into the world system” (16). Relatively low numbers of social movements during the early 1990s (Almeida 124) suggest that this program was largely successful, if not in paralyzing civil society, at least in subduing mobilization. Though there are many forms of resistance in the films, the focus here is on resistance through solidarity, which other scholars have not analyzed. Isabel and Estela challenge the atomization, as well as social and economic exclusion, imposed by declining elites. These women are fairly isolated within the elite sphere, but they resist by acting in solidarity with others similarly marginalized.

The present analysis reads these films “against the grain,” since neither focuses primarily on the marginalized classes, but rather on the wealthy of society. It also differs from previous studies of La ciénaga as it takes into account domestic worker Isabel as the only prominent subaltern character, and compares her to her counterpart, Estela, in the lesser-analyzed Coronación. La ciénaga is a well-known film among critics, acclaimed as the height of New Argentine Cinema’s expressiveness (Oubiña 1). Scholars have analyzed the film’s portrayal of gender and sexuality (François;Rangil 211), the gaze (Forcínito 109-10), religion (Rangil 211) and the decadence of this social class (Wolf 32; Page, “Espacio,” 158; Varas and Dash 201), as well as the use of setting (François 8; Page, Crisis, 183), sound and scene changes (Page, Crisis, 184-5, 187; Varas and Dash 197). Coronación, on the other hand, has received little scholarly attention. The film places events of José Donoso’s novel in the present day (2000) and exposes a consumer mentality among all social classes.

Silvio Caiozzi adapted the 1957 novel Coronación into a film in 2000. Although the film follows the book closely, it is set at the turn of the millennium. Technology and setting differentiate the film from the pre-dictatorship period of the novel. The story centers on Misiá Elisa, a cantankerous, unpredictable woman in her nineties who is part of Chile’s waning agricultural oligarchy. While sometimes she is loving and kind, this can change without warning to her accusing her grandson and maids of thievery and promiscuity. Andrés, her sexually repressed, middle-aged grandson, becomes obsessed with the adolescent caretaker he has hired. Seventeen and from the province, Estela is wooed by Mario, a market delivery boy, by whom she becomes pregnant. Mario’s brother René convinces he and Estela to burglarize Misiá Elisa’s mansion, but during the robbery Estela warns Andrés and then leaves with Mario.

Continuities between the film and Donoso’s novel suggest that although technological elites have replaced Andrés and Elisa’s landed elite, class structures remain largely untouched from 1950s and 2000. The novel, written two years prior to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, critiques the old agricultural oligarchy and the subsequent generation of professional elites without ascribing to leftist revolutionary ideology. Estela leaves her position as a domestic worker, but instead of proletarian revolution, this action marks movement from rural to urban poverty largely unmediated by contemporary governments. Carlos Ibáñez del Campo was elected to a second presidency in 1952 by a broad coalition of voters. However, the populist rhetoric he used in his campaign did not correspond to political action as the international drop of copper prices began to hurt the Chilean economy, and his administration did little to bring about a redistribution of wealth. Although much of the film is identical to the novel, its adaptation takes on new meaning in post-dictatorship Chile. The parallel between Ibáñez’s authoritarian presidency and
Pinochet's dictatorship half a century later prompts the viewer to understand the film through the lens of a post-dictatorship society in which the poor and working classes continue to be excluded.

In 1998, Chile was experiencing an important turning point in military impunity. Spanish judges Baltasar Garzón and Manuel García Castellón had confirmed jurisdiction to investigate human rights violations in Argentina and Chile, and, finding Pinochet in London, issued an international warrant for his arrest and extradition to Spain (Márquez Carrasco and Alcaide Fernández 692). Earlier that year, Pinochet had retired from his role as head of the armed forces (Evans 211), and a member of the Chilean Communist Party had filed a complaint against him for forced disappearances (Lutz and Reiger 87). Pinochet returned from London about a month prior to the release of Coronación in 2000, where he had lived for nearly a year and a half under house arrest (Evans 209, 235). Though he remained a senator-for-life as under the 1980 constitution created by his dictatorship (Loveman 356), the year of his arrest marks a decline in his political capital in Chile and abroad. Many scholars argue that international pressure and Pinochet's detention triggered changes in society's attitude toward past human rights violations, but Rebecca Evans argues that Chilean human rights organizations and politicians used it to investigate accountability. She says, “An unpredictable and uncontrollable event like Pinochet’s arrest in London would not have had the impact that it did, had political forces in Chile not recognized and worked to utilize Pinochet’s arrest as an opportunity” (212). Evans correctly identifies Pinochet’s detention as threatening to his reputation as well as the impunity guaranteed by amnesty laws. Several Chileans filed legal complaints upon his return, in contrast to the very few made before his arrest (Lutz and Reiger 89). Yet Evans is perhaps overly optimistic, because the former dictator ultimately evaded justice due to claims that he was unfit to stand trial.

Ariel Dorfman describes society as three different Chiles at the time of Pinochet’s arrest. Energetic youth lived in the moment, unconcerned with the past, while others still mourned and sought redress, and still others continued to side with Pinochet (63-65). The film adaptation re-makes the crisis in political representation of the Ibáñez era as a crisis among the Chilean elites, although it conspicuously avoids the two Chiles that still address the present as post-dictatorship. It reveals the failure of the agricultural oligarchy and professional elites to negotiate technological and economic changes, as well as the sea change even among the poorest of society toward consumerism that scholars such as Tomás Moulián and Nelly Richard describe.

Lucrecia Martel’s 2001 film, La ciénaga, delves less into the lives of the lower classes, instead demonstrating the decadence of the Argentine provincial agricultural oligarchy through the lives of two families. It takes place near the Bolivian border with Salta province, in the city La Ciénaga (The Swamp) and its surrounding region. Martel, in an interview with Luciano Monteagudo, notes that in daily life the plot is difficult to identify (75); La ciénaga mimics this aspect of life. Mecha and her family put up with the summer heat on their pepper farm, while Mecha’s cousin Tali and her family live in the equally warm city. Opening with a scene by the farm’s pool, putrid with neglect, La ciénaga introduces family members and domestic servants through scenes of their daily lives. The younger children, armed with rifles, spend each day exploring, as the teenagers escape the stifling heat by sleeping indoors or by the pool. Mecha, her husband and guests pass the afternoons in a drunken stupor, while Tali and her husband conscientiously care for their children in town. Mecha and Tali’s plan to buy school supplies in Bolivia lends the film some momentum through the sluggishness of the daily routine.

La ciénaga’s neo-realism and its investigation of Argentine territory situate it within a generation of films produced around the turn of the millennium known as New Argentine Cinema (NAC). Joanna Page explains NAC as the result of specific socio-political factors:

New Argentine Cinema borrows from neorealism its rawness and newness in order to present contemporary Argentina as a territory in need of charting, dissecting, and recording and to present film as a tool ideally suited to the construction of social knowledge (or . . . of a crisis in social knowledge). Taxonomy is a task acquiring some urgency given the economic and political crises of recent years, which have produced a whole host of new social identities, arising from mass unemployment, shifts in migration patterns, and the changing role of the state. (Crisis 36)

The town, city, farm, mountain and dam map Argentina as both urban and provincial. A few scenes in Buenos Aires link the province to the economic center. José, Mecha’s son, is in charge of pepper distribution in the federal capital, which highlights the connection between farm and consumers. As Page suggests, La ciénaga dissects the new social identity of Mecha’s family in light of the Argentine agricultural oligarchy’s declining political and economic power.

Thus, the film goes beyond taxonomy to critique political and social effects of neoliberal economic policy. However, its social critique, according to Page (Crisis 31) and Patricia Varas and Roberto C. Dash (191), evokes New Latin
American Cinema (NLAC), a movement that began in the late 1960s and spanned three decades (Pick 1). NLAC was “politically engaged” (Stock xxvi), committed to avoiding exoticism through the denunciation of society's disenfranchisement (Cabezón Doty 34); filmmakers proposed cinema as a “staging ground of the battle for political power” (Patricia Aufderheide, qtd. in Pick 15). Quentin describes the break between films of the early post-dictatorship and NAC as the absence of overt political references, without eclipsing a critique of politics. “There are no references to the atrocities of the military dictatorship or to the disappeared. But that was precisely the major cliché of the previous decades . . . Without dealing explicitly with those questions, the new filmmakers have set out to look at their consequences” (114-115). Politics are once again linked to economic problems, but NAC films question as opposed to setting the stage for action.

These two films reveal the decadent state of old wealth and a crisis among some elite sectors in the Southern Cone at the height of neoliberalism, and the reactions to this decline among certain members of the lower classes. The elite in Coronación and La ciénaga continue to benefit from their assets, which have their roots in landed wealth. Wealthy Chilean lawyer Andrés Ábalos does not appear to work besides overseeing an ambiguous set of assets. And even though Tali and Mecha plan to save money by buying school supplies in Bolivia, Mecha’s family seems uninvolved with work on the farm. Yet in spite of their wealth, there is little to envy about their lives. Daily life is repetitive and dull, the properties are in decay, relationships are strained or broken, and elite characters are marked by wounds or physical decline. This decadence is symbolic of social relations in the Southern Cone during Chile’s político-military crisis, and weaves an allegory of society immediately prior to Argentina’s economic crisis.

I do not reduce either to a simple allegory, but each film is symbolic to a certain extent. Both take place in the private sphere, with a focus on families within their respective homes. An analysis of La ciénaga as allegory reveals the void left by the post-dictatorship Argentine state, and symbolism in Coronación is suggestive of the failings of economic policy in urban Santiago. Extensive writings on La ciénaga address the film’s allegorical potential and I draw from them to support my claims, but since Coronación has little academic literature, I emphasize the symbolic portrayal of social, economic and political trends at the turn of the millennium.

In the latter film, Misiá Elisa is in physical decline and dies at the end. The embodiment of a dying landed oligarchy, she has managed her rural affairs from the seat of Santiago. The film simultaneously reverses, infantilizes and mocks Elisa. Although her domestic workers treat her with respect, she is no longer able to care for herself. They crown her for her birthday party, but no guests attend and she dies alone. The past of the nation, Elisa is no longer relevant to or powerful in the present. Her grandson, Andrés, represents educated urban elites that are unable to keep up with changes under neoliberalism. He is educated as a lawyer, but instead of practicing, he simply manages the family wealth. Andrés has not married or had children, indicating that his line will soon die out. This generation in the film represents the decline of professional industrial elites in a Chile managed by technocrats. In both the novel and film, Elisa’s children are dead, and the erasure of this generation is significant because it obscures the relationship between the absent parents and the recent authoritarian regime. Ibáñez was president of Chile from 1927 to 1931, later serving as the elected president from 1952 to 1958 (Loveman 187). The 1957 novel critiques society during the return of Ibáñez, whose regime the landed class supported. The film also skips the generation of elites with ties to agricultural oligarchies to show the decline of their parents and children. Caoizzi produced the film version almost thirty years after Pinochet’s golpe de estado as well, and its critique of a decadent wealthy elite is uncannily valid in the democratic transition, when Pinochet’s policies, including the neoliberal economy, held firm.

The film adaptation visually contrasts the urban poverty of poor neighborhoods with the modern urban center and the gloomy Ábalos mansion, and the gaze of lower-class characters suggests the desire to consume the same products that the wealthy own. Per capita income increased in the 1990s in Chile (Vos, Taylor and Paes de Barros 170), but inequality also greatly increased (Moulián 93-94), meaning average per capita income is skewed in favor of the wealthy. Social programs targeted the very poorest while simultaneously limiting civic participation, thus “marketing” the neoliberal model to many sectors of society and ensuring its continued acceptance (Olavarriá 15). As Mario and Dora watch television while stuffing toys for sale, they recall Tomás Moulián’s description of consumerism in Chile. He states,

El crédito permite desarrollar estrategias de mejoramiento de las condiciones de vida, ensayar diferentes modalidades de conquista del <<confort>>. No son . . . estrategias de movilidad social, puesto que el efecto de su despliegue no es un cambio de estrato. Se trata de algo distinto, pero simbólicamente importante: de un acceso a la <<modernidad>> de los bienes u objetos que antes estaban restringidos a los ricos. (99)

Credit permits the development of strategies for bettering life conditions, for testing out different
modalities of the conquest of ‘comfort’. They are not . . . strategies of social mobility, since the effect of their use is not a change in status. It is about something different, but symbolically very important: the access to ‘modernity’ to the goods or objects that before were restricted to the wealthy. 3

Poor characters access a “modern,” i.e. wealthy, lifestyle through television, and Estela and Mario occupy downtown and tourist spaces as lovers, but in day-to-day life they serve the needs of the upper class. Mario and his brother plan to burglarize Elisa in order to move north and start a better life, but in the film their gaze follows television advertisements and expensive items owned by others, indicating the desire to consume. René in particular and Mario to a lesser degree crave access to products because of they represent modernity and social incorporation.

La ciénaga presents a more problematic case for a symbolic reading. Montaegudo sums up the difficulty nicely. “There is nothing symbolic in La ciénaga (The Swamp) since every single thing has an odd and disturbing materiality to it. Moreover, at times, the very physical presence is just overwhelming. Yet, you can’t help being aware of the pulse of a reality larger than the film itself. In La ciénaga there’s a sense of unveiling the profound, buried strain of a whole society through a handful of fully fleshed out characters” (69). The sounds and heavy heat are almost palpable, and the characters’ wounds are very real as well as symbolic. Page refers to this apparent lack of symbolism when she claims of La ciénaga and La niña santa that “The films suggest symbolic readings while refusing to ground potential tropes within a defined frame of reference” (Crisis 183). Yet both scholars recognize that the film contains a deeper meaning applicable to Argentine society at large. “Allegory,” Page says, “stages the relationship between personal and political, private and public, which is often central to the production of political meaning in art” (Crisis 182). Decay in Martel’s film points to a greater social decadence that engages this private/public relationship. Cécile François describes La ciénaga as a mosaic or a puzzle of a bigger picture, saying that it provides glimpses, often from the eyes of children, of the monstrously and suffocating repetition of adult life. Page takes this one step further, using a discussion of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to describe how the film does “not simply perform a withdrawal from that which transcends the individual; [it] register[s] a crisis in the very structures of signification that embed the individual and the private within the general and the public” (191-192). La ciénaga is allegorical in that it reconstructs state failure in 2001 Argentina through the breakdown of the relationship between the personal and the political.

The film reveals the state of provincial elites immediately prior to the 2001 economic crisis, yet the Argentine state is conspicuously absent from the film. Labor relations changed as Ménem’s policies opened the market. Wages declined steadily in the years leading up to 2001 (Petras and Veltmeyer 35). Workers lost job security, and government pressure on unions limited negotiations (Murillo 141). In a drastic attempt to prevent capital flight, banks froze holdings on December 19, and private funds were devalued by almost half when officials converted dollar holdings to pesos. Seeing their savings vanish, the middle classes took to the streets in protest. James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer affirm that “There is no question that the principal arms of the state apparatus (the judiciary, the police, and the armed forces) as well as the traditional parties, politicians, and Congress, lost their legitimacy in the eye of a majority of Argentines in the events leading up to and immediately after the uprising of December 2001” (28). The decline of the private sphere in La ciénaga indicates alienation and decay at a deeper level: the breakdown of the public through crisis fragments the relationship of the personal to the political. Therefore, where Caiozzi’s film reads as a microcosm of social classes in a post-dictatorship, consumer society, Martel’s allegory denounces the profound failure of the Argentine state.

In both films, one of the most prominent representations of the decline of the oligarchy during these times of social crisis is through property decay. Where the novel Coronación relies on narration to convey elite decline, the film provides striking visual contrasts between past and present by alternating between Elisa’s gaze into a lost past, the present gaze of other characters, and Caiozzi’s lens. The opening scene begins with the click of a door opening, and then cheerful music on the title screen, which continues while the lens trains on beautiful antique furnishings and pictures in Elisa’s room. Elisa’s grandson Andrés is speaking to her, but the music drowns him out as Elisa smiles and bobs her head in time to the music. Andrés has entered while Elisa is daydreaming. When he sees that she is staring at a picture of herself as a young woman, he turns the picture around and the music cuts abruptly to silence; Andrés asks Elisa, who is disoriented at the invasion of the present, to sign a check. This opening scene introduces past abundance and present financial decline as a significant theme in the film. Later, Elisa’s gaze through a window shows the courtyard when she was a young woman. A group of energetic and well-dressed people descend from a sleek, horse-drawn carriage, and the girl Elisa dances with castanets around an impeccably groomed gentleman. Inside, the lens turns to Estela, who appears curious about why Elisa is smiling. She stands to look out the window and her gaze shows the dry fountain; instead of the vivid black and red of her imagination, the courtyard is a drab gray. The contrast between their gazes reveals the quality of changes in the past several decades.
La ciénaga lacks contrast between the past and the present; like the majority of NAC, the film’s narration is entirely contemporary (Page, Crisis, 32), but it also shows the property in decline. The camera’s slow movement depicts a fetid, green swimming pool in which most characters refuse to swim. Mecha, the matriarch of La Mandrágora, complains that the filter has been broken for years, and domestic servant Isabel warns Momi, Mecha’s youngest daughter, that she can catch illnesses from the water. Beds groan and creak as the heat causes the teenagers to fall into a stupor and sleep away the summer days. The younger boys find a dying cow mired in a swamp, recalling the film’s title. In addition, the viewer may confuse thunder with the distant sound of rifles; the sound is one of danger, whether natural or caused by people.

Decline permeates not only the physical world, but also relationships in both films. La ciénaga portrays the heat as one of the factors contributing to lack of interaction. A television commercial for a mini-refrigerator catches Mecha’s attention as she is lazing in her bed. She orders one for her room, where she spends increasingly more time, so as to always have near ice for her wine. The teenagers and adults spend much of the day in bed; heat stifles action. With the exception of two scenes with people dancing, all but the children move sluggishly on the farm, which is appropriately named La Mandrágora for its ability to produce this effect (Page, Crisis 183). The heavy atmosphere appears to corrode not just the house and property, but also relationships. Momi, fifteen, initially fights the listlessness, constantly trying to wake her sister Vero and domestic servant Isabel. However, in the last scene Momi returns from a neighborhood where supposedly a Virgin has appeared. In one last attempt to avoid isolation, she has sought out the religious figure, but pulling up a chair to the edge of the pool, Momi tells Vero, “No vi nada” (“I didn’t see anything”). These actions after her failed search for the apparition indicate her acceptance of the alienation and apathy in the women of her family.

Problems with relationships mark the film Coronación as well. Andrés has difficulty establishing healthy sexual relationships due to a strict religious upbringing, which the film suggests as the root of his obsession with Estela. Andrés’s inhibitions have prevented him from producing an heir to his wealth, which both practically and symbolically excludes him from integration with the younger technological elite. Andrés’s and Elisa’s physical decline mirrors that of the mansion. Overweight and lethargic, Andrés’s apathy generally suppresses emotion, except when speaking to a friend about his attraction to Estela and later when accosting her sexually. Misiá Elisa’s aged, dying body stands in contrast to her recollections about her youth. Psychological decline accompanies the physical: she strikes out verbally and physically against her grandson and caretakers, accusing them of theft, neglect and love affairs. Although the older domestic servants call her “una santa” (“a saint”) and “una reina” (“a queen”), through physical decline she has lost the ability to maintain relationships.

Physical decay is even more prominent in La ciénaga. Like Andrés, the middle-aged characters are overweight, but their unhealthiness is still more striking since they often are wearing bathing suits. In an early scene, close-ups of bare, thick waists and loose, wrinkled skin decry a lack of self-care. The return to the pool at the end of the film replaces the bodies of the adults with teenagers: Vero and Momi begin another cycle of physical decadence through inactivity and excessive drinking. Momi is the farm’s only inhabitant without physical damage through accident or age, but her lack of hygiene has earned her nickname Momi sucia, or “dirty Momi.” Ana Martín Morán claims that the motif of wounds represents the children’s learning process (in Elena and Díaz López 233). However, since they continue to participate in the same activities that gave them their wounds, I posit that it instead reveals bodily decay in addition to that of relationships and property, which suggests the profound degradation of these provincial elites. Its effects also seem to spread through contact, given that the relationship between Mecha and her cousin Tali results in Tali’s small son falling from a rotting ladder at their home.

As I have shown above, both films portray the decadence of certain oligarchic elites through the bodies of the characters and the deterioration and neglect of their properties. Additionally, the relationships between characters, in particular between family members, suffer from betrayal, (La ciénaga), sexual repression and outbursts of desire (Coronación), and apathy and outright dislike (both films). The questioning of a weak state due to neoliberal economic changes through the decline in the Argentine provincial oligarchy, as well as the industrial oligarchy’s decadence in Chile, is clear. Yet the weakening of these wealthy families stands in stark contrast to other characters in these films. To stop after the analysis of decadence could imply that Coronación and La ciénaga are apathetic or even sympathetic to the plight of these elites, which quite obviously is not the case. Still, a wide review of scholarship on these films reveals that analyses halt after a critique of gender, religion, or economic decline due to neoliberalism. I argue that these works converge in the resistance in which certain characters, poorer and less central, engage. Each plot includes a female, non-white domestic worker who endures unfounded accusations and racism, resists sexual advances of her employer and finally leaves his service. Isabel (La ciénaga) and Estela’s (Coronación) attempts at resistance end in escape through solidarity with other similarly marginalized characters.

The Argentine province Salta is very different from the Chilean capital, Santiago, and race reads differently in each
location. Even though Isabel and Estela have similar skin-tones and physical characteristics, Argentines would read Isabel’s character as indigenous, while Chileans would call Estela morena (brown). This is due to historical as well as current factors in each country. Also, though both Isabel and Estela are “others” to mainstream society in the films, the indigenous Salteños as a population have been the focus of paternalism and certain “self-help” strategies (Carrasco 285; Snipes 239), while provincial female migrants to Santiago recently have used migration as an attempt to improve life possibilities (Pappas-DeLuca 99, 107). Paternalism defines relations between female domestic workers, the state and employers in both countries. However, La ciénaga’s indigenous population is relegated to the margins despite being in close proximity to middle-class and wealthy whites, while Coronación’s poor, darker-skinned characters seek integration in a city where they form a permanent underclass.

Argentine discourse has consistently “othered” indigenous people like La ciénaga’s Isabel. Marjorie M. Snipes asserts that the 1966-73 and 1976-83 military governments depicted indigenous cultures as underdeveloped, and a threat to national identity as well as to national security since they occupy the border regions (239). Morita Carrasco describes two phases of official policy toward indigenous people in Salta from the 1970s to the 1990s. She explains that prior to 1992, the state treated indigenous groups as passive beneficiaries, but with the cholera outbreaks these marginalized populations gained national and international attention (270, 285). She notes that, “la elite salteña se aprovechó de la situación para resignificar sentidos que asocian lo indígena a la miseria, la incapacidad, el salvajismo y la brutalidad” (“the Salteña elite took advantage of the situation to resignify understandings that associate the indigenous to misery, incapacity, savageness and brutality”; 270). From this point on, the state provided resources to indigenous groups, but required them to participate as agents in their own clientelization. Isabel of La ciénaga seems conscious of this representation of indigenous people, and actively resists it by making Mecha’s family reconsider its misconceptions.

While Isabel is a domestic servant in Salta and contests these descriptors of her person as an indigenous woman, Estela in Santiago is more reactionary to sexual aggression and paternalism. Estela’s aunt has taken her from the province to work with her in the Ábalos mansion. This, according to Katina Pappas-DeLuca, is a relatively common situation for provincial females. She argues that lack of employment opportunities alone does not explain the number of female domestic workers in Santiago’s households. Instead, based on several interviews with these workers during the late 1990s, she claims that “many Chilean women, with few other alternatives, have used migration for domestic labour as a mechanism to physically and metaphorically transcend the economic and social constraints on their mobility. Rural-to-urban migration for domestic labour [is] one of the few paid employment options for women of lower socioeconomic status” (99). Estela resists gender roles that Andrés, Misiá Elisa, her boyfriend Mario, and the older domestic workers expect and reinforce. Through her, the viewer sees the struggle between her reproducing the stereotypical provincial, non-white female, and negotiating the urban space of Santiago as a marginalized person.

In the context of the supposed leveling effect of neoliberalism, these films would appear to support the idea that a free market provides more opportunities for mobility because Isabel and Estela leave the abusive confines of their elite employers to seek their fortunes in the outside world. Estela even seems to have the added advantage of having her migration to the city from the countryside mediated by her employer Andrés, a common occurrence for Chilean domestic workers from the rural south (Pappas-DeLuca 102). Yet this is clearly not the case given the structure of these societies at the turn of the twenty-first century. Even as the films portray their escape from abusive situations, Isabel and Estela are non-white workers in societies with hierarchies rooted in racial and economic prejudices. La ciénaga’s wealthy characters engage in dialogue about civilization and barbarism relating barbarism to how indigenous people live. Andrés, in contrast, understands far better than his grandmother that Estela’s skin color is not of utmost importance. Still, both he and Dr. Gros reveal a willingness to take advantage sexually of their domestic servants. Coronación portrays the opportunities available to the lower classes through this attitude, as well as through setting some of the scenes in Mario’s shantytown home. Although the films may appear to convey that neoliberal economic policies have freed people like Estela and Isabel to work where they choose, deep-seated racism, sexism and classism as represented through the elites demonstrate that, like their living counterparts, these young women have nowhere to go. The only space available is a similar situation or the informal economy so prevalent under this economic model. Still, their leaving questions the authority of the elite families, and is made possible by declining power represented through decadence.

Isabel’s resists to a certain extent her role as a domestic servant in La ciénaga. Instead of submissively taking orders, she is one of the most responsible characters, and even on occasion subtly teaches the children. Around the same age as Mecha’s oldest children, Isabel is responsible for cooking, cleaning and general caretaking of the family. Isabel’s character stands in contrast to the family’s sluggishness, and contests elite perceptions of the indigenous person as “ignorante, incapaz, atrasado” (“ignorant, incapable, backwards”; Carrasco 257). The dichotomy of civilization and barbarism, predominant in Argentine conceptions of race since Sarmiento’s Facundo,
does not hold true in the film’s representation of indigenous characters. Although Sarmiento envisioned a united Argentina with the provinces brought metaphorically into Buenos Aires through the discipline of commerce and education, and later military regimes adhered to this practice (Snipes 239), La Mandrágora’s setting in Salta and its resistance to incorporation even into the bustle of the city (read: civilization) of La Ciénaga defies the positive side of the binary, yet apart from general laziness, neither does it fall into barbarism. Though this elite family considers Isabel a barbarous “other,” she represents civilization in the sense that until she quits the job, she encourages normative and in some instances progressive social behavior. Isabel resists racial prejudices and subtly assumes a role of instruction for the adolescents.

Isabel provides a model for Momi to avoid the pattern of female isolation in her family. Momi’s potential to throw off her family history is related to her relationship with Isabel, but this potential is the result of Isabel’s resistance to her prescribed role as a servant. Isabel acts as a mother to Momi, and maintains a power over her that Mecha has relinquished through dislike of her daughter. She wields this power adeptly. In one scene, the phone rings and Momi insists that Isabel must answer it, but Isabel refuses. Later, Isabel needs a chance to leave for a Carnival party, and sends Momi to shower to get her out of the way. In these scenes, Momi eventually gives in to Isabel, answering the phone and taking a shower. In the process, Momi becomes more like a responsible adult who takes care of her own needs and personal hygiene (recall her nickname “Dirty Momi”). As with the deterioration of everything else on the farm, however, Momi succumbs to apathy and drowsiness once Isabel leaves. Isabel’s constant presence was a path of resistance for Momi as well as Isabel, but Momi could not maintain this on her own.

In Coronación, Estela also balks her role as a submissive domestic servant, which she expresses in her rejection of Andrés through her relationship with Mario and her assistance with the robbery of the mansion. As mentioned above, one of the many aspects of decadence in the film is Andrés’s obsession with Estela, but far from encouraging his advances, Estela cultivates a relationship with Mario and sneaks out in collaboration with the other servants to spend time with him. Estela’s behavior is more stereotyped and reactionary than Isabel’s thoughtful resistance to social prejudices. Even so, she displays agency by choosing to go through with the scheme to rob the mansion, and again to warn Andrés about the robbery when Mario and René abandon her to Andrés’s sexual advances. This vacillation results from an awareness that both Andrés and Mario are using her, and she struggles against domination by male characters. This representation thus begins to leave the realm of the stereotypical to challenge gender biases and the patriarchal structure throughout Chilean society.

Nevertheless, the ultimate act of resistance by Estela and Isabel is leaving the employ of these families. This step is precipitated by the rejection of sexual advances by Andrés in Coronación and Mecha’s son José in La ciénaga. The manner in which each quits is consistent with how each film presents the larger social context, yet taken together, the fact that both films reconstruct the national crisis through decadence of the oligarchy and the defect of a female domestic worker suggests that the marginalized may use these fissures caused by político-military or economic crisis to contest their situation.

Isabel tells Mecha that she is going to live with her sister; Mecha berates her for leaving, and Momi watches Isabel drive off with her boyfriend on his motorcycle, revealing the fluidity of employment in Argentina at the turn of the millennium. In the film’s monotonous progression of events, this scene is no more important or emphasized than any of the others; it is simply another event in day-to-day life. Estela’s leaving, in contrast, occurs during the climax of Coronación. She has helped Mario and René gain access to the mansion, but when she finds herself at the mercy of Andrés without any aid from them, she reveals the burglary to Andrés, for which René beats her. Mario, agonized by Andrés and René’s treatment of Estela, helps her leave with him. Estela’s resistance is more complicated than Isabel’s: her choice is between two oppressive situations as opposed to quitting the realm of La Mandrágora. Still, within these limited options Estela spurns the decadent elite and their violent, though comfortable, mansion.

In addition to their individual strength, these films portray solidarity with similarly marginalized characters as aiding Estela and Isabel in their rejection of dominant spaces. Mario’s sister-in-law and her children have a small role, but they have a critical connection to Estela in that she joins them in making items for sale. Isabel often interacts in public spaces with a group of indigenous teenagers, who give a ride in one scene to La Mandrágora’s children; later, Isabel’s indigenous boyfriend drives away with her on his motorcycle. Economic solidarity in Coronación among the poor, and solidarity in movement in La ciénaga, especially as the latter relates to power over or movement away from elites, suggest that the marginalized in this time of crisis may contest their second-class status through the relationships they have with one another. Estela and Isabel can leave the Ábalos mansion and La Mandrágora because they have people with whom to leave and live outside of these elite spaces. Where most other sites in the films are dominated by elite actors, Andrés is an uncomfortable outsider when he makes a brief
visit to Mario’s shantytown, and La ciénaga never shows the house of Isabel’s sister, to which she will go upon quitting La Mandrágora. Even though Isabel and Estela, as marginalized women, have limited opportunities under Argentina and Chile’s patriarchal societies and economic structures, the force of their resistance resides in the support of other similarly marginalized characters and in their rejection of prescribed roles for society’s “others” in dominant spaces. By leaving the employ of clearly decadent elites, these films suggest that fissures in elite blocs caused by crisis may create space for marginalized sectors in Argentina and Chile to challenge the confined spaces to which their societies relegate them.

Notes

1 For further discussion of how the military dictatorships undermined social relations, see David Harvey’s “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” Pilar Calveiro’s Poder y desaparición: Los campos de concentración en Argentina, and Naomi Klein’s The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. Return

2 Jean Grugel’s “Populism and the Political System in Chile: Ibañismo (1952-1958)” offers a detailed analysis of politics, society, and the economy during the time of the novel’s publication. Return

3 All translations are mine. Return

Works Cited


