



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 10  
Issue 1 April 2006

Article 9

10-18-2016

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Frederick J. Ruf  
*Georgetown University*, [rufb@georgetown.edu](mailto:rufb@georgetown.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Ruf, Frederick J. (2016) "The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/9>

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# The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Holy Girl (La Niña Santa)* (2004).

Lucretia Martel invokes a powerful word in her film, “*The Holy Girl*,” and what we have to wonder as scholars of religion is whether that term, holy, is used merely rhetorically or with an intention and intelligence that will enable us to understand the word and the experience more richly as a result of her film. We do. Director and screenwriter, Martel, who also wrote and directed *La Cienaga* (*The Swamp*) (2001) blends several motifs in the film: a dense sociality; the ardent and confused desire for religious vocation; humid sexuality; specialists (medical and otherwise) in the ear, nose, and throat; and the transient nature of a hotel. Oddly and disturbingly, and even comically, the girl of the title is, in fact, holy, and that holiness is as difficult to categorize or even judge as its religious writers have often said. Martel and her film, however, give us many valuable suggestions.

The film presents a small conference of ear, nose, and throat specialists in a provincial hotel in Argentina. The daughter of the woman who owns the hotel is touched inappropriately as she listens to a street performance, and the offender turns out to be one of the doctors from the conference, Dr. Jano (Belloso). Unaware of the event, her mother romantically pursues the doctor who awkwardly responds, until he discovers the identity of his victim, and events begin to tumble out of control.

Such might be a detached description of “*The Holy Girl*,” but, put more accurately, the film presents several days in the lives of two sixteen year old girls,

and not the story of Dr. Jano. In fact, all other characters are secondary to the two girls and especially to Amalia (Alche), the “holy girl,” a fact that solves the ambiguity of the film’s ending. Grumbling viewers want to know what happens to Dr. Jano at the film’s conclusion. Martel does not care. She wants us to know what becomes of Amalia and her friend, Josefina (Zylberberg), and nothing more.

The film opens with the first of many scenes of religious education (perhaps the film attempts to bring about the religious education of its viewers). The class of adolescent girls listens as Ines (Maestro), their teacher, sings that she is a “vileness singing to you ... [who has] given in to you, God,” and then she weeps. It is an overcharged event, and the girls perceive the eroticism it contains, the moral upheaval, the latent violence, and the potential violation. Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* comes quickly to mind. “Be alert for God’s call,” Ines informs them, and although the girls exasperate their teacher with extreme possibilities (“what if the call asks me to kill?” “If the call is in the night I’ll think it’s the devil!”), we see that the girls are just echoing some of the potential of Ines’ song and of the nature of holiness. The remainder of the film presents either Amalia’s misunderstanding of God’s call or her very deep experience of it. Martel seems to relish that ambiguity, but she also seems fascinated with Amalia. I would say that Martel embraces Amalia’s character and her experience. Of all the daughters in the film (and there are four mother-daughter pairs), she alone has the receptivity, the erotic

feeling, and the embrace of transience (since she lives in a hotel) that make her able to hear – and answer – a religious call.

The central event of the film, Amalia's molestation by Dr. Jano, is as sad and sordid as one might expect, but Amalia faces and embraces it almost immediately, and she perceives Dr. Jano as the object of her mission, though it is an extremely ambiguous mission. Is it to save him? If it is, what sort of saving is it? Amalia contrives to touch Jano's hand in an elevator, and she goes to his room and rubs his lotion on her shirt and then continuously smells it: sensuousness is integral to her calling. So is violence. The girls take a bus to a bridge where legend says a mysterious accident took place, and they come all too close to hunters' shots. These young women are drawn to violence. Is holiness necessarily violent, too? Later Amalia tells Josefina that she has found her calling, meaning Jano, and instantly a naked man falls from the balcony above and stumbles into the room, stunned but unhurt. Amalia will trigger Jano's guilt and shame when she forces him to face her, and she will be inadvertently instrumental in his downfall. And yet through all of it, Amalia is oddly otherworldly, unconcerned with the real world and its reactions to molestation, violence, and guilt, as is, perhaps, true both of adolescents and mystics. What better mystic, in fact, than the adolescent?

Two symbols animate the film: the theremin, an electronic instrument that produces haunting, ethereal sounds when the player's hands pass between its

antennae; and the thermal pool in the hotel. After Ines sings of her calling to God in the opening scene, the class pauses when it hears the theremin through the window. When Amalia receives her call in the molestation, the theremin plays, as well. Amalia's over-heated imagination and her ripening sexuality, the molestation, the desire for a religious calling, the easy physicality that Amalia enjoys with her mother, the erotic fantasies Amalia shares with Josefina, the somewhat chaotic life of the hotel (so disapproved of by Josefina's mother) – these and many others 'play' Amalia, and Lord how she (mutely) sings. Her face is as deeply and subtly expressive and alive as any I can recall in recent film. As for the thermal pool, all of the characters descend into it, as all of them swim in languid eroticism. They simmer, they cook. The highly sensual Helena used to be a diver, until she injured her ear. Amalia's ear is sharp (she hears that theremin so very well), and she submerges far better than any of the others, easily winning a breath-holding competition. It is apt that the film ends in the pool, Amalia and Josefina lazily swimming like fish while Jano's world collapses. In the air and in water, Amalia (or any holy girl) is disturbingly, fluidly holy.