



# They Live: Violence, Horror and Spectres in Four Contemporary Argentine Films

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**Abstract.** In the Argentine film *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, Lucrecia Martel, 2008), the protagonist Vero is haunted by the possibility of killing someone in a hit-and-run. Although hinting at the crimes committed during the last dictatorship in Argentina, *The Headless Woman* refers more to a mechanism of the past that is transformed and updated within contemporary society. In this essay, Martel's film acts a starting point in the exploration of recent Argentine films that deal with spectres from the past that pervade everyday life in the present: *Clementina* (Jimena Monteoliva, 2017), *One Sister* (*Una hermana*, Sofía Brockenshire and Verena Kuri, 2017) and *The Returned* (*Los que vuelven*, Laura Casabé, 2019). In a decade in which we can notice a remarkable growth of the horror genre in Argentine cinema, these films embrace several codes and characters from the horror genre to approach the Argentine reality. The author discusses how these filmmakers adopt similar aesthetic features from the horror genre to invoke and address the violence that permeates Argentine society today, with special attention devoted to ghosts, a key figure to understand an ongoing history of brutalities that usually go unresolved.

**Keywords:** Argentine contemporary film, horror film, ghosts and memory, violence, haunting and spectrality.

## Introduction

In northwestern Argentina – the birthplace of film director Lucrecia Martel and the setting of her film *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, 2008) – it is believed that when there is a trauma, the soul leaves the body. This is what seems to happen to Vero, the protagonist of *The Headless Woman*, who roams about confused, resembling a zombie because she is haunted by the possibility of having killed someone in a hit-and-run on a deserted provincial road. Nobody notices Vero's altered state but her mentally ill, bed-ridden aunt Lala, who shares the vision of

cryptic apparitions with her niece and even guides her on that matter: “Don’t look at them. The house is full of them. Shhh! They are ghosts. They are leaving. Don’t look at them. If you don’t look at them, they will go away” (translation by the author).

These are not the delusions of an old lady since Lala can detect something hidden behind Vero’s unusual tone of voice. *The Headless Woman* depicts an erasure operation carried out by Vero’s family: the dents in her car are repaired in a nearby town, the pieces of a baking pan broken during the impact are cleaned up, the hospital and hotel records are deleted. Vero tries to own up to her crime and take responsibility, but as the evidence fades away, she backs off and tacitly agrees through her silence, following the path suggested by Lala. The true story of the accident is never told. As stated by Natalia Taccetta, “the film shows how someone can disappear without leaving traces of those responsible and any risk of legal censure is blocked” (2011, translation by the author).

Martel has often remarked on her fascination with horror cinema and how the genre could unlock new readings of her films (Wisniewski 2009; Harvey 2017). As in a horror film, in addition to zombies, ghosts and the shuddersome title, *The Headless Woman* features things buried in the garden and terrifying tales about trees that move by themselves along the road, and it is populated by spooky acousmatic sounds (the blow of something hitting a fence, a wheezing in the dentist’s office, the crackles of an x-ray, the hum of poorly tuned radios). Furthermore, the film echoes a dreadful past that affects the present: the mechanisms of negation, concealment, complicity and oblivion unleashed by the last Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983), which appear transformed and renewed within contemporary society.

Taking *The Headless Woman* as a starting point, this essay briefly explores recent Argentine films – *One Sister* (*Una hermana*, Sofía Brockenshire and Verena Kuri, 2017), *Clementina* (Jimena Monteoliva, 2017) and *The Returned* (*Los que vuelven*, Laura Casabé, 2019) – that adopt similar aesthetic features from the horror genre to invoke and address the violence that permeates Argentine society. In a decade in which there has been an impressive growth of the horror genre in Argentine cinema,<sup>1</sup> *Clementina* and *The Returned* adopt the canonical elements

1 After a century in which the production of horror films was sporadic in Argentina, the genre has flourished since the late 1990s. The amateur feature *Zombie Plague* (*Plaga Zombie*, Pablo Parés and Hernán Sáez, 1997) became the most influential impulse for an expanding underground circuit that included not just the production of ultra-independent films, but also the development of festivals such as Buenos Aires Rojo Sangre and specialized distribution companies such as VideoFlims and SRN. In the late 2000s, the genre finally began to be backed by public funds, receiving a significant boost from the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA, in Spanish) through grants, screen quotas, film series on public

of the genre aiming at a niche audience, while *The Headless Woman* and *One Sister* do not strictly fall within the horror genre as such but still interact with it, portraying day-to-day life while embracing some horror tropes<sup>2</sup> and displaying not prototypical ghosts, but those who appear as mysterious, ethereal, dubious figures of questionable existential status.

I have chosen these films because they tackle different (but related) themes and approach horror in different ways while holding a metaphorical dimension by acknowledging *real* horrors. Horror deals with the expression of a widespread feeling in human experience (fear) and can be variously and diversely articulated – thus not necessarily pursuant to the features that became the basis for the genre. Therefore, the idea here is not to work with genre as something normative or closed, but as a productive critical lens for film analysis.

I will devote special attention to ghosts, which frequently appear in the four films. Haunting the present, ghosts are key to understanding past experiences of brutality and their impact on contemporary culture. I rely on the approach to ghosts proposed by Jacques Derrida, whose *Specters of Marx* (1994) is commonly considered the catalyst for the so-called *spectral turn*, establishing a new field – spectrality studies – in which the spectre is a concept that explains how the ghost and its capacity to haunt evolved from a supernatural phenomenon (fictional or otherwise) and conventional metaphor into a theoretical tool to examine culture and society (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 1–10).

Derrida's spectre is a deconstructive force that inhabits different time periods, disturbing the natural flow of events and traditional notions of temporality and history. It addresses injustices of the past that continue to inform the present, rejecting the idea that things should just be left behind and that the past is static while the present is uniform. Christina Lee states that “the spectre's return signals that there is still work to be done to prevent future injustice” (2017, 7), then articulating the futurity implicit in haunting. In line with Derrida, Avery Gordon considers the ghosts as vigilantes resulting from historical exclusion and invisibility (2008, xv–xx). According to her, ghosts are manifestations of repressed or unresolved social-political realities that refuse to vanish because there is

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television and exclusive spaces at prominent film market meetings such as Ventana Sur. This has led to a high-standard production with a broad distribution, from international festivals to Netflix (Rodríguez 2014; Risner 2018).

2 Laura Cánepa (2016) will name this variant that employs a tonal distance from mainstream genre expectations as *social horror*, which is in line with a global trend of contemporary horror cinema contentiously designated *post-horror*: a new wave of films produced in the 2010s mixing arthouse minimalism and established genre conventions so as to offer existential or politically “deeper” stories (Church 2021), such as *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

still something at stake. As T. J. Demos affirms, “it is precisely the negations, disavowals, and rejections of historical responsibility and present advantage, occurring in political discourse as much as in cultural representations, that allow and even cause the ghosts to fly free” (2013, 12–13).

## The Curse

In *The Headless Woman*, ghosts appear through the jerky, low-definition VHS of a wedding party, where Lala recognizes a friend who should have been dead by then, relatives who were senators and judges and even Monsignor Pérez, a local high-ranking clergyman who was the first one to refer to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo as mad women during the dictatorship. In addition to the washed-out VHS footage, ghosts also inhabit the aunt’s dim bedroom, leave little handprints on the car’s windscreen [Fig. 1], and surround Vero wherever she goes. Her face or the nape of her neck – always framed by flashy blonde curls – stands out at the forefront almost all the time, detaching the character from a blurry background. In that nebulous, out-of-focus zone there are ubiquitous shadowy profiles [Fig. 2]. Sometimes, they take human forms: as a young boy with Indigenous features (recalling the child whom the protagonist might have run over), or as domestic servants and other workers, who keep the protagonist’s comfortable bourgeois microcosm running.

While hinting at the crimes committed during the last dictatorship in Argentina,<sup>3</sup> *The Headless Woman* approaches what strongly persists from collective violent behaviour, especially those attitudes minimized by their passive aspect. In the film, nobody cares about a possibly missing poor boy until his body is found in the canal and endangers the status quo where Vero, her family and her social class have rested for centuries. His disappearance is normalized, and his death would be ignored – so as in life, when he was just another spectre washing cars or carrying pots, inhabiting both the edges of the image and the edges of the town. Here, I am looking upon a broad notion of spectrality that enables it to encompass not only the ghosts of the past but the possible hauntings of those *living ghosts* produced in and by the present, as proposed by Esther Peeren: certain marginalized groups of people who are, for various reasons, perceived and/or perceive themselves as ghostly, phantasmatic or spooky in some way, on the basis of their lack of social visibility or unobtrusiveness (2014, 4–9).

3 The authoritarian regime implemented a systematic plan that included abduction, detention in clandestine centres, torture, execution and improper burials, wiping out about 30,000 lives. Most of the Argentine population deliberately withdrew their gaze from these atrocities.

As Deborah Martin writes, *The Headless Woman* “does deal explicitly with questions of guilt, responsibility, trauma and amnesia, the central themes of post-dictatorship Argentine culture (and of the many films which reflect more explicitly on that period) but nevertheless avoids making that reference explicitly, and as a result re-focuses our attention on the violence and impunity of poverty and social marginalization contemporary with the film’s making and its vague setting (1990s–2000s), even whilst hinting at their broader historical resonances. The film thus suggests a counter-memory that avoids neat expositions of the past yet at the same time reflects upon its traces, iterations and irruptions in the present” (2016, 80–81). In addition to the reiteration of an old sinister script that continues to be fully operational, the film mixes cell phones and contemporary cars with hairstyles, outfits and music<sup>4</sup> from the 1970s, establishing a retro atmosphere that reinforces the crossover of timelines. Likewise, Cecilia Sosa proposes, in her study of the film, how “the affects explored in Martel’s film may be crucial in confronting the new faceless, that is, those whose social exclusion persists unnoticed during the current democratic regime, and whose lives are in a sense ‘ungrievable.’ [...] [And the] lives made to disappear during dictatorial times cannot be grasped except in conjunction with the silence surrounding poverty, the new spectre of the present” (2009, 250).<sup>5</sup>

## It Follows

*One Sister* tackles similar issues to *The Headless Woman*: the contemporary disappearances of people, the helplessness of some sectors, and the complicity or indifference of society. It uses the same troubled chronology strategy of Martel’s film: the setting looks like a ghost town frozen in time, making it difficult to establish with certainty when the story takes place. The desolate

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4 Two songs in the film are particularly relevant: *Zambita pa’ Don Rosendo* and *Mammy Blue*, in the version sung by Demis Roussos. According to Mariana Enríquez (2008), the latter song became popular in the 1970s with Julio Iglesias’s version and it is still associated with the dictatorship. *Zambita pa’ Don Rosendo* was sung by folk singer Jorge Cafrune, who is widely known for using his voice as an instrument for social justice. The official story declared that his death by being run over in 1978 was an accident, but many believe it was an assassination devised by military officers linked to the government.

5 For insightful supplementary analyses that examine ghosts and the horror genre in Martel’s film, see Oubiña (2022) and Verardi (2022), as well as the video essay by Grant (2019), which links *The Headless Woman* to the American B-movie classic *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, 1962), which the filmmaker considers as a great inspiration. Schwarzböck (2016) does not particularly scrutinize the film but engages in a dialogue with it in her work on the social, cultural, and political inheritances of state terrorism in post-dictatorship Argentina.

rural landscape at twilight, which is cloudy and cold, with an insistent mist that covers the scrubland, appears several times throughout the film. There are countless ruins across the village that seem abandoned, since human figures are never seen in the immense open spaces [Fig. 3]. The scenery could be defined as what Peter Hutchings termed an *uncanny landscape*, which is “suffused with a sense of profound and sometimes apocalyptic anxiety; it is also a landscape of a comprehensive dispossession and vacancy” (2004, 29).

The film accompanies the arduous journey of Alba, whose sister Lupe disappeared. It was produced in the wake of the far-reaching #NiUnaMenos [Not One Woman Less] movement,<sup>6</sup> and according to the directors (Betancourt 2016), one of its early references is the book *Dead Girls (Chicas muertas)*, published in 2014 and translated into English in 2020), by Selva Almada, dedicated to recovering the stories of three teenagers murdered in the 1980s in small villages in Argentina. Another primordial spark for the filmmakers was the popular legend of *almanula*, about a woman who had sex with “inappropriate” partners (married men or members of her own family) and did not repent, and consequently was turned by God into a mule and condemned to wander through eternity dragging heavy chains. This curse can befall any woman who does not avoid unseemly temptations.

The guards, the noise of the police radio, the searching of a woman who, despised by the official forces, goes out to investigate the disappearance of her sister on her own, and the sceptical view of justice outlines a crime plot. Although the film is a whodunnit story, its development is rather elusive, since the question of who is to blame is never answered. Alba is constantly wrangling with bureaucracy and a lack of concern from the authorities, questioning acquaintances and strangers, receiving evasive answers or plain disinterest, and sketching potential suspects. However, the film moves away from the detective genre to venture out to a more oscillating terrain that employs non-linear events, the mixture between the real and the dreamlike, ambiguities and uncertainty.

Brockenshire and Kuri build up a strong sense of suspense to convey a “haunted aesthetic” based on indeterminacy. In terms of narrative, they hide facts and do not provide exact data. Visually, the film is flooded with darkness, shadows and furniture or objects that block the view, which increases the interplay between covering up and revealing things. Information is given but not fully exposed, which generates attention and apprehension in the audience. The visible is also

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6 For a brief overview of the #NiUnaMenos movement against gender-based violence, its achievements and challenges since its creation in 2015, see Alcoba and McGowan (2020), Prusa, Garcia Nice and Soledad (2020), and Leszinsky (2021).

strained when images appear through dirty, fogged glass, or when the source of light is intermittent flashes from torches, headlights and nightclub lighting. A significant scene is the children's hide-and-seek game on trains. In addition to the upsetting variation between darkness and bright spots of light, playing hide-and-seek is also linked to Alba's search as there are speculations, there is anxiety, and one needs to "find" someone who is not available, who is out of sight.

Acoustically, they make extensive use of off-screen sounds, which are emblematic in horror films because the shift between what is heard and what is seen creates a fundamental tension between the known and the unknown. These sounds represent gaps in a synchronized world, breeding fear due to the impossibility of anchoring or embodying a voice or noise (Donnelly 2005). In *One Sister*, off-screen sounds are mostly present through anticipation: a sound may be extradiegetic in one scene but may become diegetic in the next, provoking a feeling of estrangement for a few seconds. Combined with the visual and the narrative instability that the film places us in, the use of off-screen sounds hinders our ability to normalize this technique. Additionally, the soundtrack is punctuated by artificial, low-pitch sounds, another disturbing element typical of horror films.

The lack of concrete explanation as to Lupe's whereabouts opens up new avenues for filling the void: in some scenes, Alba catches a glimpse of her sister's spectre [Fig. 4]. This apparition also harasses the wife of Lupe's boss, Teresa, who is introduced towards the end of the story. She has a different perspective than Alba, and brings new possibilities about what could have happened to Lupe. Like Vero in *The Headless Woman*, Teresa behaves as if she is hiding something. In other words, she tries to suppress a past event that will not stop haunting her.

## Let the Right One In

*One Sister* focuses on the growing number of missing women and femicides in present-day (despite the enormous social mobilization and advancements in legislation in the last few years – Argentina passed an anti-femicide law in 2012), and the impunity that follows. The title *One Sister*, rather than *The Sister*, is a small but meaningful choice in locating the story it tells as if it were just one among many others. *Clementina*, released the same year as *One Sister*, could be another of these stories. It does not narrate a case of a disappearance,<sup>7</sup> but rather

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<sup>7</sup> Monteoliva's following film *To Kill the Dragon* (*Matar al dragón*, 2019) is entirely devoted to this topic and recounts the disappearance of women through a fantastic tale that also uses elements from the horror genre.

of gender-based violence, through a variation of the classic setting of the haunted house intertwined with the theme of family loss. The female protagonist is in a state of constant peril and panic, enduringly haunted by mysterious events that can be interpreted either as supernatural or as proof of her insanity. However, it becomes clear that what fazes her is the fear caused by an abusive partner.

After a brutal battering by her husband Mateo, Juana suffers a miscarriage. He is at large, and it is not the first time he has attacked her. Upon leaving hospital, she refuses to report him or tell her parents about what happened. She lives an isolated life with no friends. In the many interviews with victims of domestic violence, the director has noted that women's isolation, in tandem with the withdrawal from her loved ones, is a common feature in abusive relationships<sup>8</sup>. Also in this regard, Mateo's proposal to flee to another city, start over from scratch and not inform anyone is representative of abusive partners.

The only people who know about Juana's situation are a neighbour, a policeman and a social worker.<sup>9</sup> Not having another place to go, Juana returns to the big apartment to which she had recently moved with Mateo. As Barry Curtis explains, "one of the features of the haunted house film is the uncanny animation of the house and its interiors; the flexing of margins and the refusal of objects to stay stored in place or within the limits of their customary significance" (2016, 11). That is exactly what happens in Juana's apartment. The restlessness that takes over the space is bolstered by the fact that the building is very old and under renovation, which at the same time justifies and enriches a mass of ambiguous sounds: the gasping on the phone, the knocking on the door, the water leaking, as well as paradigmatic horror noises, such as the tinkle of a music box and the giggle of a child.

On top of that, Juana does not change the locks, nor buy a mobile phone or carry a panic button. The dark and labyrinthine apartment where she lives, in conjunction with the high-angle shot that unrelentingly captures Juana, makes her seem even more fragile, lonely and at risk [Fig. 5]. It contrasts with her brief luminous hallucinations, always outdoors, where Mateo offers his hands in rare loving gestures, which the camera replicates by caressingly floating over her hair and skin. There is an actual luminous moment when Juana dances in the

8 See the interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpSis5MSCAg>. Last accessed 08. 10. 2022.

9 Even though differing from the complete institutional disregard that Alba experiences, the authorities who attend Juana do so insensitively; they are visibly ill-prepared despite their good intentions. It is shocking, for example, that the policeman, even armed, ends up killed by Mateo. In the case of *The Headless Woman*, the authorities (which seem to have long-standing ties with Vero's family) collaborate to cover up the possible crime, as we can infer from how the protagonist's husband, brother and cousin/lover proceed.



courtyard, bathed in sunlight, with expansive and buoyant movements. This moment is part of a series of small events that line up in Juana's itinerary towards healing: from cleaning her blood off the floor to going back to work, wandering around the city, sewing a dress and putting on makeup. As a witness of this process, the camera leaves the intimidating zenith position and starts moving alongside her until it culminates facing her head-on, showing the character in a resolutely empowered posture [Fig. 6].

If, initially, the paranormal prevails – the little ball that invites a macabre game, the television that turns on out of the blue, the neighbour's explanation, and finally the apparition of the baby Clementina – the menace of Mateo never ceases to hound Juana until it materializes on his return, which entails enduring his recurrent threatening behaviour. The outside world also enters the protagonist's private universe through her discovery of the lawsuit of Silvina Strada, a woman who is imprisoned for killing her husband after years of being beaten and mistreated. The Strada case pushes Juana to (strategically) take action. Meanwhile, Clementina is the ghost that returns to avenge her premature death, giving traction to the plans of her mother, who would do anything to have a second chance to protect her daughter.<sup>10</sup> In the gory ending, the mundane definitely triumphs, with the character “exorcizing” her ghosts by taking justice into her own hands.

## The Hills Have Eyes

Like *Clementina*, *The Returned* ends in bloody carnage. The film takes place on a yerba mate farm in northeastern Argentina in 1919. It is organized into three non-linear but mirrored and complementary chapters, each representing the perspectives of protagonists Julia and Kerana, which converge in the final part. Julia is a white woman, the wife of Mariano, a powerful *hacienda* owner who rules with an iron fist and is an exponent of a colonialist, macho society based on the exploitation of the weak. After undergoing successive miscarriages, she gives birth to a stillborn child. Desperate, she ends up betraying the trust of her supportive mixed-race servant Kerana and asks Iguazú (a fictitious Indigenous deity)<sup>11</sup> to bring her baby back to life. The baby is resurrected, but not alone.

10 A kind of female fraternity is formed (including the neighbour, a victim of gaslighting, who ends up in an asylum) that, directly or indirectly, influences Juana's decisions.

11 According to Casabé, the legend of Iguazú – described in the film as “giver and destroyer at her whim and will” – was created from the mixture of different myths from the Guaraní realm with the tale *The Monkey's Paw* by W. W. Jacobs and the novel *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King. See the

Three interrelated themes propel the story forward: one of them is the condition of women as white men's possessions, always in a place of submission and passivity. However, class, as well as ethnicity, plays an important role as the positions of Julia and Kerana are not equivalent – while the former can pass over her husband's violence, silently adhering to his decisions and fulfilling her role without conflict, the latter, being a servant, cannot enjoy the same kind of privilege. Julia's character is also complicated by her careless view of the complex spiritual cosmovision of the Guaraní universe and by how she appropriates the maid's son in her eagerness to be a mother, without questioning Kerana's sudden disappearance (she is secretly killed by Mariano). Through the appropriation of the child, a tenuous reference is made to not only the long history of taking children from Indigenous and enslaved peoples, but also the kidnappings and criminal appropriation of babies during the last military dictatorship, as well as the situation of impoverished families who, nowadays, see themselves obliged to "give away" their offspring due to the impossibility of raising them amidst extreme economic difficulties.

*The Returned* touches upon two other thorny issues. The first refers to the social conditions and the injustices of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas: murdered, displaced or reduced to servitude, they were deprived of their land, their culture, their bodies and, finally, their soul. They are *the returned*, zombies seeking to avenge those who have dispossessed them. The film retrieves this icon of the horror genre by relying on its metaphorical value as a reference to social exploitation, based both on the original Haitian folkloric myth of sugarcane workers transformed by voodoo to yield more in the plantations, and the tradition of the post-apocalyptic zombie as a result of the pathologies of capitalism, beginning with George A. Romero's cinema. Female complicity mutates Julia into a zombie, like Kerana and the other Indigenous people, as if she were considered one of them, or someone who fights alongside them. The second addresses the persistence over time of exploitative social and labour relations, which have not changed in centuries, and which points to the same machismo, land conflicts and racism in contemporary Argentina. This has kept Indigenous populations extremely marginalized and women as second-class citizens.<sup>12</sup>

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video posted on YouTube: Debate sobre o filme *Os Que Voltam* | XVII Fantaspoa [Debate about the Film *The Returned* | XVII Fantaspoa]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-8uRkOO\\_ys](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-8uRkOO_ys). Last accessed 22. 09. 2022.

12 It is important to mention that Mariano's brother is a priest, which stresses the Catholic Church's role in this configuration: both the forced conversion and interference with women's bodies.

Laura Casabé (Transit Filmfest 2020) has revealed<sup>13</sup> that the film was inspired by the famous painting *The Return of the Indian Raid* (*La vuelta del malón*, 1892) by Ángel Della Valle, made in the throes of the so-called Conquest of the Desert, the frontier war waged against Indigenous populations in Argentina throughout the nineteenth century. At the time, the painting sought to synthesize and justify the military campaigns and concurrently feed the nascent Sarmentine binomial of “civilization and barbarism” (2003), with the Indigenous people being demonized as the savage who needed to be destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Another inspirational source for the director was the short story *The Mensú* (*Los mensú*, 2007) by Horacio Quiroga, published in 1917, on the semi-slavery regime that ruled yerba mate plantations in Paraguay and northeastern Argentina, which has not undergone substantive advances in the last hundred years.<sup>15</sup>

A “Quirogan” atmosphere is also noticed through the ominous and menacing jungle, which is so idiosyncratic in the oeuvre of the writer (Eljaiek-Rodríguez 2017). In the film, the humid, dense and chaotic jungle features prominently and haunts through its enigmatic and immeasurable nature [Fig. 7], evoking “the sublime” in its both wondrous and terrifying indifference to the human forms which it dwarfs (Church 2021, 143–144). The prevailing silence in these scenes only illuminates an infinity of unsettling noises, from the guttural murmur of the wind to a symphony of animals, unveiling a space full of life. Since the arrival of the colonizers, the jungle has been indiscriminately stripped of its riches, and the film juxtaposes the exploitation of this territory and the exploitation endured by the Indigenous people and women. Thus, the jungle is another monster that gathers the zombies, and it rises as a sort of spectre in *The Returned*: a source of deep-rooted terrors, whether as a green hell that does not submit to the supposed rationality of those who try to subjugate it, or as a refuge where the rebellion of the oppressed germinates.

13 See the interview on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygiW7qL-TRY>. Last accessed 8. 10. 2022.

14 *The Return of the Indian Raid* was painted for the specific purpose of being sent to the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago to commemorate the fourth centenary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World. It was the first image dealing with an issue with powerful emotive content of an unmistakably political and ideological magnitude, inverting the symbolic terms of invasion and plunder while implicitly suggesting the extermination crusade as the culmination of the conquering of America in relation to the 1492 celebrations. (See Malosetti Costa's comment on the painting: <https://www.bellasartes.gob.ar/coleccion/obra/6297/>; and the YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/TKtY00I2Ahs>, both last accessed 8. 10. 2022.). In 2010, Casabé embarked on approaching this subject with her first short film, also titled *The Return of the Indian Raid*.

15 See Re, Roa and Gortari (2017), and the documentary *Frayed* (*Raidos*, Diego Marcone, 2016).

If the threat embodied by the jungle shapes the exterior as dangerous, the interior is not safe either. Like Juana's apartment in *Clementina*, Julia and Mariano's house is inhospitable, labyrinthine and murky. There is a distinct tension-generating procedure that is reiterated not only in these two films but in all the works analysed here: the camera is placed, insistently, on the protagonists' shoulders [Fig. 8], accompanying them and connecting with their fears and expectations. On many occasions, the frames leave an empty space that can be filled, at any time, by a frightening irruption – an exemplary horror-specific device, as described by Julian Hanich: “in dread scenes the unbalanced composition cues us to expect the space left free to be filled by the killer or the monster” (2012, 164–165).

One more element repeatedly pervades our *corpus*: the thresholds that articulate the various places in the filmic space through doors, windows, cracks and re-framings, visually signalling the existence of borders, as well as their porosity. Metaphorically, these thresholds mirror the ghost's characteristic liminal position between life and death, presence and absence, materiality and immateriality, visibility and invisibility, natural and supernatural, past and present (Blanco and Peeren 2013, 2). Finally, the threshold is a place of crossing, of the passage between two different dimensions or states, which entails the possibility of a transgression and the destabilization of an order (Thibaudeau 2021, 136–137).

## Spectral Justice, or They Live

Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez affirms that ghosts are portrayed as messengers of what is hidden: “either because it is difficult to talk about or because it is dangerous to unearth. Cinematic specters thus become incorporeal reminders of the effects of violence, social inequalities, and the rupture of taboos, all staged in a genre that is not traditionally recognized for its political significance (although from its inception it has been a well-suited form for representing the outlawed). [...] From this perspective, ghost stories are ways of narrating untold stories – belonging to the realm of the ‘unspeakable’ and the abject – as well as stories often unilaterally narrated” (2018, 126).

In the films discussed, the spectres shine a light on how atrocities committed throughout time form a chain of horrors that impact current social dynamics, including contemporary forms of violence and exclusion: from the colonialist (and later nationalist) genocide of native peoples and those erased by the dictatorship, to poor children who are run over by a car from which nobody gets out, raped

and murdered women, the Indigenous populations mired in poverty and disdain, and those affected by the immense deterioration of the welfare system and the increase of disparities driven by neoliberalism. As Sosa (2009) concludes about the ghosts of *The Headless Woman*, traumatic events can affect the whole of society beyond obvious sites of suffering, an observation that also applies to *One Sister*, *Clementina* and *The Returned*.

Following Derrida, Murray Leeder argues that ghosts “can signify the ways in which memory and history, whether traumatic, nostalgic, or both, linger on within the ‘living present.’ It can be a potent representation of and figure of resistance for those who are unseen and unacknowledged, reduced to a spectral half-presence by dominant culture and official history” (2015, 1). The ghosts are the consequence of a lack of human justice and an absence of recognition of damage, both individually and collectively, therefore they question the hegemony of a discourse and a system that denies and ignores it. Hence, despite Lala’s advice to shut out and neglect the *espantos*, the vulnerability that assails Alba, Mateo’s raging outbursts, and Mariano’s pistol, these worlds are persistently challenged by disconcerting beings that, although erased or cloaked, have not entirely disappeared. Instead, they have remained to haunt the social imagination.<sup>16</sup>

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## List of Figures

**Figures 1–2.** In *The Headless Woman*, ghosts can leave little handprints on Vero's car window and occupy the blurry background that frequently surrounds the character.



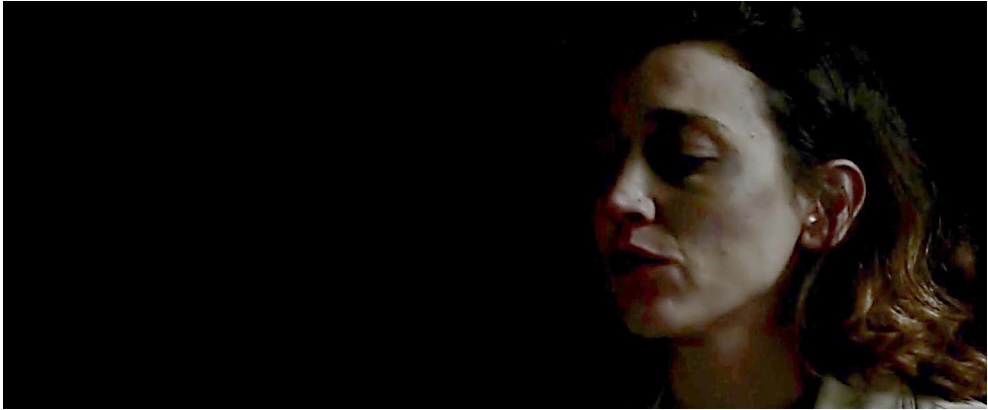
**Figure 3.** Like a ghost town: desolate, abandoned rural landscapes predominate the setting in *One Sister*.



**Figure 4.** Alba recognizes Lupe's spectre in *One Sister*.



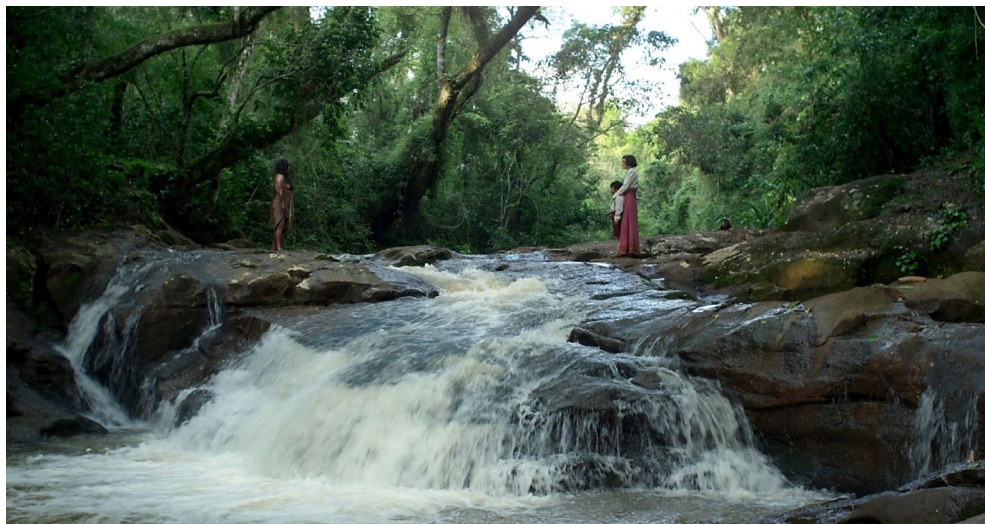
**Figure 5.** In *Clementina*, the “empty” spaces that surround Juana and the high-angle shot that captures her increase the impression that she is continuously in danger.



**Figure 6.** Towards the end of *Clementina*, Juana goes from being chased by the camera to facing it head-on, visually cueing that she is leaving her place as a victim and taking justice into her own hands.



**Figure 7.** The grandeur of nature shines through in *The Returned*, like when Julia meets the zombie Kerana.



**Figure 8.** The camera focuses on Julia's shoulders in *The Returned*, a typical horror trope that generates tension, as well as the empty spaces left in the frame and the duskieness that hinders the vision.

