

Shrieks from the Margins of the Human: Framing the Environmental Crisis in Two Contemporary Latin American Movies

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Abstract

The contemporary fictional films *Nosilatiq. La belleza [Beauty]* (dir. Daniela Seggiaro, 2012) and *Los decentes [A Decent Woman]* (dir. Lukas Valenta Rinner, 2016) explore the complex interaction between the human and the non-human worlds, in this case the animal world and the natural landscape, in the context of environmental crisis. In both movies, images of natural landscapes are accompanied by depictions of class inequalities and the environmental crisis. As fiction, the films present an environmental perspective through a symbolic framing of nature. This highlights the marginal place assigned to the non-human world by progress and development. In *Beauty*, nature is threatened by deforestation of the dry forest landscape called the Bush or the Gran Chaco. Throughout the film, the landscape is always present in the background, either fragmented or just suggested in the memories and subjectivity of the protagonist, Yolanda, a girl of the Wichí people. *A Decent Woman* adopts the trope of idyllic nature through a nudist community set in a natural jungle-like area adjacent to a gated community for wealthy residents. Belén, the protagonist, a maid working in the gated area, begins participating in the nudists' rituals. Employing posthuman and new materialist theories, the article analyzes scenes from both movies that foreground the interactions between the human and the more-than-human world in the light of the threats to the natural ecosystem. We discuss the framing of the environmental crisis through the intervention of animals and the animalization of characters, which exemplify the haunting presence of a receding but resistant nature. While nature vanishes from the screen—it is either cut out for agriculture or for ornamental parks in private neighborhoods—the viewers are placed in an active position that prompts ethical thinking concerning the environment.

Keywords: *Beauty*, *A Decent Woman*, the more-than-human world, nature/culture, environmental crisis, Latin American cinema.

Resumen

Las películas de ficción contemporáneas *Nosilatiq. La belleza [Beauty]* (2012) de Daniela Seggiaro y *Los decentes [A Decent Woman]* (2016) de Lukas Valenta Rinner exploran las complejas intra-acciones entre el mundo humano y el mundo más que humano, en este caso el mundo animal y el paisaje natural, en el contexto de la crisis ambiental. Como películas de ficción, la perspectiva ambiental se presenta a través de tomas filmicas donde la naturaleza adquiere significados simbólicos, destacando así el lugar marginal asignado al mundo no-humano por el progreso y el desarrollo. En *Nosilatiq. La belleza* la naturaleza está amenazada por la deforestación y es evocada en la narrativa por el paisaje del Monte chaqueño argentino. A lo largo de la película, el paisaje siempre está latente, enrevesado con los recuerdos y la subjetividad de la protagonista, Yolanda, una niña del pueblo Wichí. *Los decentes* adopta el tropo de la naturaleza idílica a través de la presencia de una comunidad nudista en un área verde similar a la jungla adyacente a una comunidad cerrada para residentes de clase alta. Belén, la protagonista, una empleada doméstica que trabaja en el barrio

cerrado, comienza a participar en los rituales de la comunidad nudista en ese entorno natural. Empleando teorías sobre el materialismo posthumano y el neomaterialismo, el objetivo de este artículo es analizar escenas en ambas películas que ponen de relieve las interacciones entre las formas de vida humana y más que humana, explorando cómo este tema se retrata a la luz de la amenaza a respectivos ecosistemas. Discutimos los encuadres de la crisis ambiental a través de la intervención de animales y de la animalización de los personajes en las películas, que prefigura la inquietante presencia de una naturaleza que retrocede, pero resiste. Al desvanecerse la naturaleza de la pantalla—es podada para la agricultura o para parques ornamentales en barrios privados—analizamos cómo el espectador va ganando una posición más activa que exige un gesto ético hacia la crisis medioambiental.

Palabras claves: Nosilataj. La belleza, Los decentes, el mundo más que humano, naturaleza/cultura, crisis medioambiental, cine latinoamericano.

The threat to the natural world from “extractive”¹ socioeconomic regimes that rely on plundering natural resources is a contemporary issue affecting the Earth’s biodiversity in the so-called Capitalocene, that is, the age that began in Early Modernity and has led to today’s global environmental crisis (Moore; Demos; Gómez-Barris). This extractivist practice is a phenomenon that the aesthetic repertoire deployed in the movies *Beauty* and *A Decent Woman* brings to our attention. Further, the narrative strategies of both films stress the interaction of humans with the more-than-human world as a key component in the process of becoming “post-human” (Wolfe qtd. in Kirksey 4), i.e. developing a mode of being dependent on complex entanglements with animals, ecosystems and technology. The relation between neoextractivism and urbanization leading to environmental degradation in Latin America has been pointed out consistently, as have the counterefforts to build green cities (Gudynas 147-151). The arrival of the Anthropocene has made us aware of the imminence of a system collapse that will affect all organic and nonorganic life forms (Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene” 161). The tension between the historical conception of the human as a superior, special species and the understanding of complex “more-than-human worlds” (Abram 7)² is most striking at the very frontiers where the natural world is being pushed back by urbanization and agricultural expansion. However, these borderlands also reveal the composition of “hybrid collectives” (Descola 2) on the margins of the human, that is, the mutual constitution of entities deemed ontologically different. This has led to acknowledgment of the agency of other life forms and recognition that human identity is constructed through mutual entanglement with other life forms with which humans interact, or in Karen Barad’s terms, “intra-act”:

The notion of intra-action is a key element of my agential realist framework. The neologism “intra-action” signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction”, which assumes that there are separate

¹ We draw on Gómez-Barris (2017)’s definition of “extractive zones” as those marked by “the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out regions of ‘high biodiversity’ in order to reduce life to capitalist resource convention” (xvi). Such system was installed by colonial capitalism in the 1500s and turned natural resources into commodities to integrate them within the global market. The extractive system “converts life into commodities” (xix): nature, bodies, geographies.

² We borrow Abram’s term “more-than-human worlds” to refer to non-human nature. An alternative term is Braidotti’s “non-human others” (1), which refers to beings other than human: animals, robots, inorganic matter.

individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action (Barad *Meeting the Universe* 33).

Thus, the idea of intra-action questions the nature of agency and “its presumed localization within individuals (whether human or nonhuman)” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* x). This study focuses on how the agency of the more-than-human world intra-acts with the human world. We take as our point of departure the premise that other life forms apart from the human—things, natural elements, animals, energies—also have agency. This position also highlights the impossibility of understanding the human being as the only *locus* of meaning production in a multispecies world, and calls for “a new way of thinking humanity-in-nature, and nature-in-humanity” (Moore 5) in a bioethical vision of the world.

In this article we look into the (sometimes problematic) intra-actions between the human and the more-than-human world within the frame of the haunting presence of a receding but resistant nature in two contemporary fiction films, namely, *Beauty* (2012) directed by Daniela Seggiaro (b. 1979 in Argentina) and *A Decent Woman* (2016) by director Lukas Valenta Rinner (b. 1985, an Austrian resident in Argentina).³ The movies cultivate specific poetics and narrative strategies to draw attention to the interaction of humans and their environments, accentuating how this interaction is a cornerstone in the process of becoming “multispecies communities” (Kirksey 14). The film sequences that we have chosen to comment on are those that in particular bring to the fore the blurry boundaries between the human and the more-than-human world. Thus, the aim is to analyze how the mutual intra-actions between the human world and the more-than-human world are realized in these contemporary movies.

The movies touch upon questions of territoriality in the light of the current environmental crisis originated by extractive dynamics as well as by aggressive urbanization policies. *A Decent Woman* portrays the constant expansion of gated communities on the outskirts of urban areas and its impact on social as well as on environmental relations. *Beauty* focuses on territorial conflicts and the control of natural resources. In the movies nature is threatened by the advance of the agricultural and urban frontiers, which in both cases leads to deforestation and the loss of vital resources.

Although these films do not engage in documentary portrayal of their subject matter, they are examples of what Forns-Broggi and MacDonald—with some differences between them—call “ecocinema”. For Forns-Broggi ecocinema is a cinematic genre that articulates the relation between human beings and the physical environment from a biocentric rather than an anthropocentric perspective, aiming at evolving an ecological consciousness and imagination in the spectator. Similarly, MacDonald defines a corpus of selected avant-garde films as ecocinema because

³ The titles in Spanish are *Nosilatiáj. La belleza* and *Los decentes*, but in this article we use the official translations in English due to the article’s language.

they “offer [...] audiences a depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness—qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (19), and consequently provide an alternative to commercial cinema and advertising. Thus, for MacDonald, ecocinema serves not only as a sub-genre of avant-garde cinema but also as purposeful art meant to “provide new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset” (20).

In spite of their different aesthetic approaches, which are outlined in the following paragraphs, the central narratives of both films revolve around the relation of humans with the environment and the grey zones that emerge at this “biocultural borderland” (Kirksey 13), i.e. zones of multispecies encounters. It cannot be sustained that the perspective of any of the films is fully biocentric—rather than anthropocentric—as Forns-Broggi suggests to fulfill the requirement to fit the category of ecocinema. Nevertheless, they do stress the double relation of “humanity-in-nature, and nature-in-humanity” (Moore 2016) and elicit an active spectatorship, an attentive gaze aware of the environmental issues surrounding each socioeconomic context. Through exploration of the margins of the human and the more-than-human world, both films interrogate power relations. While *A Decent Woman* portrays class differences, *Beauty* addresses postcolonial conditions, both revealing a similar logic of domination expressed through territorial tensions. Consequently, both films are in dialogue with current political issues in the region that have spatial matters at the center. *A Decent Woman* confronts the viewer with the conflict caused by the constant expansion of the private neighborhood business, and the impact of this phenomenon upon socioecological relationships (Svampa; Cuenya; Sonia). *Beauty*, on the other hand, highlights territorial conflicts and struggles for control of natural resources between indigenous peoples, the State and private capital. (Zúñiga García-Falces; Martí i Puig et. al. 2013).

In *Beauty* the more-than-human world is in crisis: the dry Chaco forest in the north of Argentina, known as “the Impenetrable” or simply as “*El monte*” (the Bush), is threatened by deforestation. *El monte* functions as a narrative “actant” (Bennett xvii), in the sense that it is not just the place where the main character’s people—the Wichí—have historically lived, but also a place that is in itself a significant and constitutive part of her subjectivity. This presence and intervention of the forest are felt throughout the film, not in a direct way, but rather in a fragmented manner. The images of the rural space are channeled fundamentally through the character of Yolanda, a young Wichí girl whose memories, subjectivity and experiences are intimately linked to the Bush landscape. Working as a home maid for a white family in a small village in Salta province, far from the Bush, her people and her language, Yolanda’s social and cultural world risks extinction. The plot of *Beauty* juxtaposes the violence against Yolanda, whose long hair is forcibly cut by her employer to make a fake braid for her daughter’s birthday party, and the violence towards the

forest that is being razed to gain space for the expanding agroindustry. Salta province belongs to the Gran Chaco area (a large geographic and cultural region that includes parts of Bolivia, Brazil, northern Argentina and Paraguay), where the soil of the dry forest is coveted mostly for lucrative soy plantations and, to a lesser extent, cattle raising. Yolanda's dreamlike-memories, which pop up spread throughout the film without following a linear narrative, show the bush, herself, her relatives or her people, intra-acting. With few dialogues, sometimes accompanied by Yolanda's off-voice speaking the Wichí-lhämtes language, these scenes of people net-fishing in the river, of swaying trees at night, of women carrying branches walking through the woods or children playing in the mud, are presented to the viewer by still camera shots accompanied by a rich complexity of ambient sounds. These sounds including birdsong, rain, the rustling of foliage and the buzzing of insects are juxtaposed with the noise of chainsaws accompanying images of dry barren land in the forest, which evoke deforestation.

The movie *A Decent Woman*, on the other hand, shows a longing for a utopia of "ideal" nature in a pristine environment, manifested through a nudist collective in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The natural environment occupied by the nudist community borders an enclosed private area where the wealthy live in comfort and security, secluded from the ordinary world and surrounded by acres of artificial park and electric fences. Belén, the protagonist, also a maid, has recently been employed to work in one of the residences of this gated neighborhood. Soon after her arrival, she discovers the nudist club on the other side of the electrified wire mesh and begins to participate in its activities, which leads to her mental and sexual awakening. Long, slow panoramic shots are used to show the multiple activities of the two communities: courses in cupcake making, running, tennis at sunset, and going shopping in the gated community, and shooting practice, tantric sex, and poetry-reading in the nudist community. Belén acts as a bridge between these two worlds for the spectator, and her coming and going crystallizes the contrast between the normative, materialistic and controlling lifestyle of the closed community, and the pursuit of liberty and a sense of self-exploration in the nudist community. At the same time, as she goes back and forth and the different lifestyles are shown, indicators of actual likeness between the two groups gradually appear, as well as the question of class difference. The very first scene of the movie takes place outside the gated community in a big city, presumably Buenos Aires, at an employment agency, when Belén and other women are being interviewed for cleaning jobs. The precarious position of these cleaning workers is emphasized: they come into the office one after the other, sit in a chair and are scrutinized and interrogated by a female voice we hear, but never see, asking "do you have children or a partner?", "Can you sleep over at work?", "All these references are from the same

family?” (our translation)⁴. The narrative delves further into the situation of exploitation, focusing on Belén but always reminding us of the privatized land, stressing ownership and control of territory and the work force. Belén does all the household work and lives in a small peripheral bedroom attached to the laundry room. She is also required to absorb a substantial part of the emotional cravings of her employer, who demands care, company and a listening ear at any time of the day and night while totally ignoring everything to do with Belén’s own existence. When the movie shows class inequalities of this kind, it is often done through subtle humorous touches, a narrative strategy that avoids victimization and puts the focus on Belén’s individual experience. The first chain of events in *A Decent Woman* sets in motion the narrative progression announcing Belén as the protagonist: Belén and other girls being interviewed for a job, Belén’s arrival to her new place of employment and the encounter with her new living conditions, the house where she will be working, the family and the guard who will fall in love with her. The narrative rhythm sometimes abandons the conventions of cinematic storytelling in order to include scenes of a more playful, almost dreamlike nature, which are relatively independent from the rest of the story and employ humor and even absurdity. This change in style is inaugurated by the moment when, while trimming the hedge of the house, Belén looks through the shrubs for the first time and discovers the nudist community on the other side. From now on the scenes are about Belén’s adventurous discovery of and involvement with the nudists.

The shots featuring birds make visible the intra-active dynamics, where the human and more-than-human world meet, giving rise to intricate intertwined agencies that affect the narrative core. The movies in question exploit specific poetic and narrative strategies—*Beauty* employs a quasi-documentary language and features documentary/ethnographic elements, while *A Decent Woman* relies on a kind of absurd humor employing theatrical or metacinematic elements. Such aesthetics draws attention to the intra-actions of humans and their environments, portraying how this mutual constitution is part of the process of “becoming post-human” (Kirksey 4), and thus posing a bioethical question. It is this particular aesthetics—a poetics engaged with the role of the environment as a key participant in the representation and formation of subjectivity and challenging “human exceptionalism” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 46)—that we are principally concerned with in this article. In the case of *Beauty* we focus on a sequence featuring the intervention of birds flying into a church during the celebration of a mass. In *A Decent Woman* we focus on the scenes where the nudist colony is preparing to celebrate a collective sexual ritual, for which their bodies are made up mimicking the fur features of different animals. These moments chosen for comment are those that particularly bring to the fore the blurry boundaries between the human and the

⁴ In Spanish the voice of the lady interviewing at the employment office says: “Hijos, pareja, ¿tenés?; “Disponibilidad cama adentro ¿tenés?”; “Decime una cosa Emi, ¿Todas estas referencias son de la misma familia?”

non-human by staging the animal. Further, we deal with certain cinematic frames that show the crisis of nature through its vanishing from the screen as a resilient presence, placing viewers in what MacDonald suggests is an active position or activated presence in the face of the fading image of the natural world, which prompts viewers to question anthropocentric ontologies.

In *Beauty*, the border between the human and the non-human is questioned by portraying the categories of the human and the animal as two comparable bioethical entities capable of producing meaning, while insisting on the idea that the forest is a constitutive part of the protagonist's subjectivity. Although both entities are equated as producers of meaning, they are simultaneously in tension or friction around the discursive-material frontiers⁵ that they occupy and produce in this encounter—is also the case with the linguistic borders between Spanish and Wichí-lhämtes. The house where Yolanda works and the church are both marked by the omnipresence of colonialist language, Spanish, while the forest and her subjectivity are identified with the precarious status of the Wichí-lhämtes language. This discursive-material frontier is mediated through its spatialization within the Catholic church, where the more-than-human world intervenes during the Sunday mass. The village people gather in the church located close to the Bush. The agency of the animal world is expressed through the materiality of the birds' shrieking as they get into the church, and by their fluttering and trilling, which interrupt and disturb the parish priest's sermon, causing the congregation to laugh, and thereby disrupting the order at church and desacralizing the ritual. Here, the limits of the human as the privileged locus of enunciation are shown through the intervention of a type of discourse that signals the agency of the more-than-human world, since it is enunciated from outside language. The animal actions—turned into material discursive event—open to a series of marginalized voices that resonate together, voices regarded as "less-than-human" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 15) in Western tradition—the Wichí-lhämtes language, the sounds of the trees, the voices of female experience—struggling to be heard throughout the film. Particularly in this scene, the birds' unexpected entrance disrupts the hierarchic figure of the priest—whose authority is reinforced by the white, masculine power position he is invested with—while delivering his sermon to the congregation. Citing St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he states that "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a ringing gong or a clanging cymbal."⁶ The priest's attempt to impose order by invoking this passage of the Sacred Scriptures ends up being ironized by his dislike of (or "lack of love" for) the birds, which turns the pragmatic force of the Biblical passage against him and the religious institution, making his words sound empty like the noise of a ringing gong. The modernizing and colonizing

⁵ In her agential realist theory, Barad (*Meeting the Universe*) is concerned with how discursive practices and material bodies intra-act in dynamic entanglements of relations producing boundaries and "the differential materialization of nonhuman as well as human bodies" (34).

⁶ In the movie, the priest says in Spanish: "Aunque yo hablara todas las lenguas de los hombres y de los ángeles, si me falta amor soy como una campana que resuena o un platillo que retiñe."

discourse (evoked also by the categorical call of the priest to the congregation to “listen only to the word of God”, and therefore to avoid the boisterous voice of the flying creatures) is interrupted by that of the birds, which distract, cause laughter, and achieve what, according to a female neighbor, no one seems to have achieved before: “someone had to silence the priest”. That is, the two discourses “intra-act”, and that of the birds is not excluded. Indeed, it ridicules the idea of “human exceptionalism” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 46) by challenging the efficacy of the human discourse of the priest.

On the other hand, in *A Decent Woman* there is no concrete animal presence, but rather a kind of nostalgic call for the animal—or the interior animal within us—and the search for a different language, codified in this case through the animalization and deconstruction of the anthropomorphic being. In a kind of meta-performance the members of the nudist group are made up as animals that pose in front of the camera eye, putting on animal gestures and sounds:



Fig. 1 *A Decent Woman*

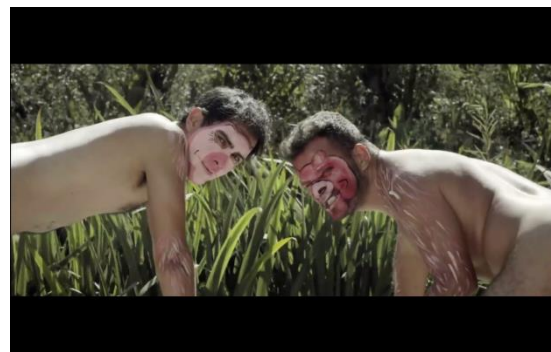


Fig. 2 *A Decent Woman*

The animals are alluded to through mimesis, and knowledge of the human body is re-elaborated through totemism (Descola 10); that is, a mode of identification through a common ontology. This new form of agency in the case of the film is also put into practice through non-language, or the search for languages beyond human semiosis, where meaning is produced from other than human instances such as animal gestures, purrs and corporeal contortions. Here, at the beginning of a ritualized and orgiastic sexual encounter, the characters do not speak, but produce sounds imitating animal noises. Moreover, at the beginning of the scene one of participants plays a recording of percussion music, creating the atmosphere of a staged and aestheticized jungle-like-setting. The music is heard through speakers hanging in the trees playing drum sounds. Each animalized body appears directly in front of the eye of the camera, posing while being portrayed, each one assuming an animal identity, but in a playful way. The eye of the camera is constitutive of the scene, as well as the human factor, protagonist and observer, the animal and the technical apparatus. This collective celebration engaging in a kind of animalization and search for transcendence serves as resistance to the individualistic spirit that governs on the other side of the fence. But even though

there is a celebration of animality as something that unites the group, there is, at the same time, a total renunciation of any pretence to originality or authenticity. On the contrary, the scene is a celebration of representation, artistry and playfulness, as these qualities are stressed by various explicit gestures of the actors directly looking towards the camera, reminding the spectator of the artistic mediation of the cinematic event. Thus, with this scene, it becomes clear that, rather than seeking an approach to nature or the animal as a source of authenticity, the nudist colony seeks to resist the advance of the space occupied by the gated neighborhood on the other side of the fence, which represents the overwhelming power of capitalist modernity that extracts value from land and from bodies. Since there is no intention of “originality”, of showing natural authenticity (which would imply a dynamic reflection of identity) we can understand these movements in the sense of “diffraction” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe* 72; Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second* 26)⁷, that is, as processes or phenomena that arise from the intra-action in the representation of the outside-inside dynamics related to the boundaries between entities considered ontologically different:

Like the diffraction patterns illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries—displaying shadows in “light” regions and bright spots in “dark” regions—the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of “exteriority within.” This is not a static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries—that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 803).

The skin painting and animal performance of the characters (Fig. 1 & 2) in *A Decent Woman* erode the boundaries between human and animal by enacting the two entities in a playful and comic way, which erases all intent of originality in the portrayal of human-animal identities.

In both movies nature is an evanescent presence, which is connected to the conflict caused by the advance of the agricultural border (deforestation in *Beauty*) and that of the urbanizing border (privatization of green areas in *A Decent Woman*). In this context nature is connected to the idea of a lost paradise or a receding one. Particularly, in *Beauty* the nature shots and the slow tempo of the action in these shots are reminiscent of pastoral aesthetics, i.e. idealized, harmonious, paradise-like images. Idyllic shots of the countryside are embedded in dream-like scenes where Yolanda’s mother lies in bed and looks outside through the square window to the green forest. The spatial framing of the window⁸ exhibiting the green trees is repeated in a zoom-in shot to the window frame in the following scene (Fig. 4), suggesting metaphorically the enclosing and exclusion of nature.

⁷ Haraway (*Modest_Witness@Second*) defines “diffraction” as “meant to disrupt linear and fixed causalities, and to work toward more promising interference patterns” (26); and Barad (2007) points out that “we can understand diffraction patterns—as patterns of difference that make a difference—to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (72).

⁸ For a detailed study of the spatial framings in this movie and in contemporary Latin American cinema see Leticia Gómez’ (2017) doctoral dissertation *Encuadres espaciales en la representación de las identidades étnico-culturales en La teta asustada, Zona Sur y Nosilataj. La belleza*.



Fig. 3 *Beauty*



Fig. 4 *Beauty*

The shots employed for these images of the forest are panoramic and static, activating what Lefebvre in his studies of cinematic landscapes calls “the spectacular mode” (28–29), that is, one where the images impel spectators to get involved in a contemplative activity, observing the landscape independently, as actants standing for themselves. The viewer abandons for a while the narrative mode of reception, which corresponds with the typical way movies are seen, following the events and development of the story, and is confronted and involved with (or maybe “enveloped by”) the life and vibrancy of the natural world. Within the multiple ways the movie invokes the Bush/ the Impenetrable in the story, the visual images present the forest as landscape, that is, as an image that mediates between nature and culture, assembling the human with the non-human, but also as the physical archive that mediates between sociopolitical relations and the non-human environment (Andermann 5). This landscape of the Bush in *Beauty* is, however, not an obvious or a given one. Many images of the dry forest are quasi-abstract, underexposed and unfocused, shown through a kind of filter which produces a feeling of texture on the image. The natural landscape thereby becomes a denied one. While the natural landscape is present in full color in some images, as if it were a naturalist painting (Fig. 3), in others the picture is altered in such a way that it cannot be accessed and seen clearly, as we can see in the following screenshot from one of these scenes (Fig. 5), thus playing with the role of the spectator and exposing a human urge to “consume” nature and to “enjoy” the landscape, and at the same time suggesting the impossibility of the fulfillment of such an impulse: the dry forest, the Bush—not coincidentally called the *Impenetrable*—is complex, difficult to see through and to understand, as it is not static and unalterable.



Fig. 5 *Beauty*

In the image above, the camera moves backwards and the image of the landscape becomes thick and unfathomable, preventing the viewer from seeing through the landscape and thus decoding nature. As we can see in Fig. 6, one of the movie's film posters shows nature from a variety of perspectives:



Fig. 6 *Beauty*

The poster shows us three images of the landscape: the center-image featuring the two children looking at the tree draws on evocations of the religious theme of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, though in this case, instead of being thrown out of the natural paradise, nature is disappearing around them. The centrality of the tree in the middle of the photograph and the children turning their backs on the camera to look at the tree compel viewers to see the tree as a material presence testifying to the jungle's disappearance while, at the same time, resisting such violence with the force of its body. The blackish background of the poster corresponds to the image of the Bush in Fig. 5, portraying nature's impenetrable character which cannot be appropriated by human signification. Finally, the image

in the lower left-hand corner showing the tree's trunk interrupted by white wavy lines exposes the aesthetic-cinematic eye on nature portrayed in the movie, drawing attention to its fictional character and thus providing a critical opening between the filmic image and the viewer. The assemblage of these three framings of the Bush landscape in the movie materializes the entanglements between nature and culture, in which the landscape as an aesthetic construct mediates between sociopolitical conditions and the natural environment.

An instance of the conflictual relationship between nature and culture in *Beauty* can be seen in the bird-hunting scene which follows just after the scene in the church analyzed previously, when a flock of birds interrupt the priest's sermon. After the mass two women comment on the interruption of the birds and this is followed by a scene of children shooting at birds with slingshots (Fig. 8):



Fig. 7 *Beauty*



Fig. 8 *Beauty*

It becomes clear that this last scene is linked to the scene in the mass where the boundaries between the human and the animal are enacted: its imperative is passed on to the children through the authority of the adult world that legitimizes their violent action—their attempt to kill the rebellious birds. Immediately after the bird hunting by the children, the off-camera voice of the protagonist, Yolanda, is heard giving a historical-testimonial discourse, with didactic undertones, directed to the viewer. She tells about holistic spiritual visions among the Wichí people, while the viewer sees images of trees, hears sounds of birds, and sees two children crossing the screen. The contrast between these two scenes—violence against nature and cohabitation with the more-than-human world—makes room for voices and discourses that struggle to be heard. The sequence of scenes that leads to the bird hunting by the children (that is, the priest sanctioning the trilling of the birds in the mass, the mothers commenting on the laughter occasioned by the birds' interruption, and then the children hunting the birds) shows the reinforcement of the boundary between the human and nonhuman, exemplifying what Derrida in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am" identifies as anthropo-theomorphic discourse, which "feeds the limit" (398) between the human and non-human. The priest's speech is held within the power conferred by the space of the church and reinforced through the declaration "These are the Words of the Lord". However, its performative power is not only that of the words of the *Bible*, but of the entire

religious discourse, which is interpellated and questioned by a manifestation of the more-than-human world. The animals break into the middle of the service, a space where in normal circumstances the animal does not “take place”, destabilizing the authority of the religious discourse since this action provokes laughter that takes away the mantle of sacredness around the ceremony. The nonhuman world is expressed here, following Alaimo, not as a mere background to be exploited, and submissive to the human being, but close, “close as one’s own skin” (238), because it sneaks in and disturbs an extremely rigid ritual. “It seems that the birds cannot endure this priest either,” Sara says to her neighbor at the church door. “Someone had to silence him,”⁹ the neighbor replies, revealing the reputation of the priest as someone who talks too much. At least momentarily, a continuum is established between voices located in less powerful positions, allying those of women with those of animals.

In *A Decent Woman* there is no animal presence, but a longing and calling for the animal within, as well as a search for a new language through animalization shots that challenge human language by utilizing gestures, noises and the body as semiotic means of communication. This act can be understood as parodic in the sense that Butler uses the term to describe drag and cross-dressing as examples of a performance that effectively exposes gender as performative. In the same way, the cross-dressing in the movie exposes human identity and human nature as performed rather than as natural. As we have seen in Fig. 1 and 2, the assumption of an animal identity in these scenes enacts a transformation, a transvestism, where there is no intention of originality. Karen Barad goes a step further in thinking about borders with the concept of “diffraction”, which, as we have already noted, abandons the assumption that there is an original somewhere, and the idea of reflection of either social or natural reality. Diffraction is marked by “patterns of difference” (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 71) that seek material connections between different entities:

my aim is to disrupt the widespread reliance on an existing optical metaphor—namely, reflection—that is set up to look for homologies and analogies between separate entities. By contrast, diffraction, as I argue, does not concern homologies but attends to specific material entanglements [...] [it is] [...] understood as a material-discursive phenomenon that makes the effects of different differences evident, a way of understanding the world from within and as part of it (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 88).

In the movie in question, the limit is challenged by the presence of the nude body, which marks a separation in space from the neighbors of the private estate (and its lavish lifestyle of accumulation of material things). Derrida speaks of nudity as the exposure of the logic of the material limit. His reflection on the nakedness of the human being in the animal’s gaze (that of his cat, observing him step out of the shower) forces him to re-constitute or rethink himself as a species. In the film this

⁹ In Spanish Sara says: “Ni los bichos se lo aguantan al cura este” and the neighbour replies “Y bueno, alguien tenía que hacerlo callar”.

dynamic would be further extrapolated to the viewer's position in front of the nakedness of that animalized human group, creating a kind of anxiety or discomfort in the viewer, who might feel the material limit separating different entities is dissolved once skin becomes the parameter of identity. This contact with a border is also channeled through Belén, the protagonist, who, in turn, represents agency in Barad's sense of the word (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*), that is, as something questioning and constantly reconfiguring the identity of the subject. Belén finds a new connection with the environment, herself, and the others through participating in the activities of the nudist group.

The conflictual spatial limit in *A Decent Woman* is also rendered in two interrelated scenes: the hunting of parrots by one of the female members of the nudist group, who justifies the action in so far as "they became a plague and eat the food that is for other animals. Pests are to be controlled" (Fig. 9); and the film's final scene when the nudist group begins to hunt the gated neighborhood's residents with shotguns as if they were the plague that must be controlled, after the nudist group is evicted by the police and the natural open space is closed off (Fig. 10). These two scenes exemplify the conflict over the right to space and the right to diversity of life in space. The invasive behavior of the parrots and the mechanisms of control of the species pose the questions of human overpopulation, human consumerist desire and the impact of its colonizing force on other life forms.



Fig. 9 *A Decent Woman*

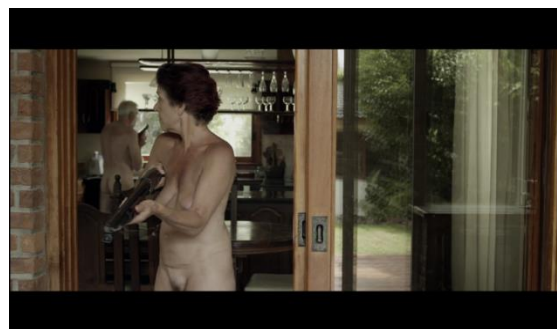


Fig. 10 *A Decent Woman*

The bird scenes in both movies—the hunting of birds with slingshot by a group of children after the mass in *Beauty* and the bird-hunting scenes in *A Decent Woman*—prompt the spectator to reflect on the equality of species, and the need for multispecies encounters which in the movies are prevented by the spatial segregation and sociocultural organization. The birds in both movies are material presences—rather than a symbol or an allegory—that haunt the human world in a "post-anthropocentric world" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 86).

In *A Decent Woman*, nature becomes a 'lost extinct paradise' for the nudist community after their eviction, because of the efforts of the gated neighborhood's inhabitants to eradicate it. That natural environment becomes indeed lost when the police shut down the place, cover the nude bodies of the members, expel them from the piece of land and close off the zone. In response to the eviction, in the final scenes

the nudist group becomes a kind of naturalist urban guerrilla force which begins to hunt the gated community's residents (Fig. 11 & 12). The bodies appear as if in a performance, because they crouch, hide and adopt attacking positions in their hunting, imitating animals. There is no dialogue in these scenes.



Fig. 11 *A Decent Woman*

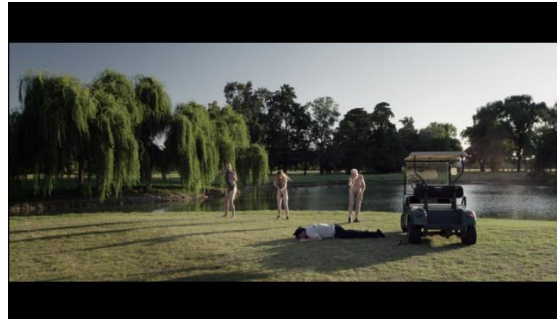


Fig. 12 *A Decent Woman*

These last scenes featuring human hunting are once again semi-absurd, since the nudist group decides to intrude on the gated community and carry on the killing even though they know that they will die. Indeed, they are finally killed by the guards in the vast golf course (Fig. 13 & 14). Nudity becomes here their uniform or flag and the mown lawn of the golf course where they fall becomes a symbol of the capitalist exploitation of animals, human beings and nature. The screenshot in Fig. 14 shows the mown lawn extending to meet the sky and the excised bodies, both human and non-human, lying lifeless as left-overs in the advance of extractive capitalism. Previously, during a celebration at the nudist camp before the eviction, the oldest members and founders of the community had remembered the many years of struggle to continue with their practice and naturalist life-philosophy, and their resistance to the constant attack of conservative forces.



Fig. 13 *A Decent Woman*



Fig. 14 *A Decent Woman*

We interpret the two hunting scenes, namely, the hunting to control the parrots and the hunting of the residents of the gated community, as expositions of the conflicts connected with the spatial limit, the confrontation between two forms of organization of space. On an ethical level, the film projects for the viewer a dissolution of the boundaries between human and non-human. On the other hand,

it also reinforces the differences between two systems or opposed lifestyles, which leads to the final catastrophe and to consideration of the question of the constitution of decent/indecent in current urban society. This idea of “decency” in the film is also entangled with a dominant Catholic idea of purity and cleanliness, and in this regard, it is revealing to take a look at one of the film posters (Fig. 15):



Fig. 15 *A Decent Woman*

In the poster we see a representation of a naked Belén covering her breast and genitals and stepping on the head of her employer’s son dressed in tennis clothes and covered in blood. Among the vegetation surrounding her like a halo there are other naked people, some of whom carry firearms, as well as animals and fruits. Such an image reinterpreting the religious theme of Adam and Eve in paradise becomes here a re-vindication of animal language, nature and the woman, where the First Woman listened to the snake’s voice as representative of the more-than-human world, ignoring God’s prohibition and his biopolitical administration of bodies and nature in Paradise.

In conclusion, the animal interventions and the framings of the natural environment illuminate the spatial boundaries between human/non-human in these two films. In spite of their different poetic and narrative approaches—*Beauty’s* quasi-documentary audiovisual language that increases the credibility of the connection between Yolanda’s experience and the ongoing conflict for the lands of Chaco forest, and *A Decent Woman’s* use of humor and absurdity to comment on the environmental politics in a megacity—these two movies blur the limits between the human and the non-human where nature and other life forms outside the anthropocentric are exposed and claimed. Our analysis and discussion show that in both films the environmental crisis is framed through the intervention of animals and the animalization of characters in the movies that give account of the world being lost in the Anthropocene. In *Beauty*, the animal intervention highlights power

issues related to the dominant language and other languages such as Wichí-lhämtes, as well as the non-human language of nature—the forest, animals—as displaced discourses that struggle to be heard. In *A Decent Woman*, the animals emerge in the nude skin of humans, deconstructing the anthropomorphic being in a ritual that proposes identity as diffraction, devoid of origin and originality. In both movies the natural landscape is shown as a receding presence whose remains are exposed on the screen. In *Beauty* the natural world and the indigenous group overshadow the narrative and emerge in dreams and the stream of consciousness of the protagonist, Yolanda, as a constitutive part of her being human. In *A Decent Woman*, nudity, the bare skin of the nudist group and the jungle, presumably on one of the river banks in Buenos Aires, expose the limit that modernizing progress, represented by the materialistic lifestyle of the gated community, strives to conquer. The meticulously mown lawn in the huge park of the private neighborhood, watered by the blood of those who struggled to save the natural environment, will be the decent face given to nature once it is appropriated by urbanization. By exploring the margins of the human, both films highlight the entanglements between power and nature by connecting the environmental crisis with issues of class inequality and postcolonial conditions. Finally, in both films, normative anthropocentric relations are crossed by aspects of gender, class and ethnicity that are called into question by the intervention of the more-than-human world displaced towards the margins of progress, but resistant in Yolanda's subjectivity as well as in the body inscriptions of the nudist group, to be further projected onto the viewer, where bioethical thinking is hopefully activated.

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