

**Killers on the Pampa: Gender, Cinematic Landscapes, and the
Transnational Slasher in Adrián García Bogliano's *Habitaciones para turistas* (2004) and *36 Pasos* (2006)**

Jonathan Risner

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill

Horror cinema has long been transnational in various ways. Dracula is essentially a geographic and temporal nomad crisscrossing historical periods and borders, and German Expressionism, specifically *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), is often credited for providing Universal's classical horror films with a recurring and trademark aesthetic (Praver 14). With new viewing platforms and modes of distribution and increasing numbers of non-U.S. directors working in Hollywood, circuits of exchange have emerged between and within the United States and other countries with vibrant horror cinema cultures such as Chile, Norway, South Korea, and Mexico.¹ In the case of Argentine horror cinema, several Argentine horror filmmakers have successfully gained distribution in United States and other national DVD markets and can be found on online retail sites such as Netflix and amazon.com. The aesthetics of Argentine horror films distributed outside Argentina, however, is hardly uniform. While some films boast English-language dialogue with Argentine actors with Argentine culture almost entirely effaced from the mise-en-scène,² other films with a cinematic *argentinidad* have also made inroads into foreign markets, especially the United States.³

¹ Needless to say, such circuits of cinematic exchange between the United States and other countries are generally grossly unequal. Megahit horror cinema franchises such as the *Twilight* and *Saw* franchises, or any film with the backing of a major U.S. media corporation, have access to production and marketing resources and exhibition space that dwarf most domestic films from other countries.

² For an analysis of two English-language Argentine horror films, *Chronicle of a Raven (Jennifer's Shadow)* (Pablo Parés and Daniel de la Vega, 2004) and *Death Knows Your Name* (Daniel de la Vega, 2007), see Risner (2011).

³ To date, there are eleven Argentine horror films with U.S. distribution. Those films are *Mala carne/Carnal* (Fabián Forte, 2003), *Plaga zombie/Plaga zombie* (Pablo Parés and Hernán Sáez, 1997), *Plaga zombie: Zona mutante/Plaga Zombie: Mutant Zone* (2001), *Habitaciones para turistas/Rooms for Tourists* (Adrián García Bogliano, 2004), *36 Pasos/36 Pasos* (2006), *Tremendo amanecer/Tremendous Dawn* (2004), *La última entrada/The Last Gateway* (2007), *Sudor frío/Cold Sweat* (2011), *La*

Two films directed by Adrián García Bogliano, *Habitaciones para turistas/Rooms for Tourists* (2004) and *36 Pasos/36 Pasos* (2006), project a version of Argentina through language, cultural allusions, and sometimes recognizable landscapes.³ The films, nevertheless, are not hermetically sealed from U.S. and other non-Argentine audiences. As I will discuss below, the films either outright belong to the slasher subgenre (*Habitaciones*⁴) or possess slasher elements (*36 Pasos*) through their engagement with staples of the genre: screen violence, especially committed against women, kinds of weapons, and a city-country binary. Here, I will examine the aforementioned slasher genre elements in Bogliano's two films as formative to the creation of cinematic slasher landscapes that appeal to both national and transnational audiences, particularly the United States. While both films can be read as slasher films by Argentine and non-Argentine audiences alike, I prioritize a U.S. audience given both films' distribution in the United States and my own geographic station.⁵ Despite distribution outside Argentina, the films nevertheless acquire an Argentine specificity through their manipulation of select genre elements fused with national issues such as abortion and national motifs such as the “*civilización y barbarie*” (“civilization and barbarism”) dichotomy coined by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in *Facundo*. Besides engaging with scholarship on the slasher subgenre, I will rely on feminist geography and film geography to examine the films' cinematic landscapes as both national and transnational spaces and thus enabling the films to circulate as Argentine slasher films for both Argentine and U.S. audiences.

sombra de Jennifer/Jennifer's Shadow (Daniel de la Vega and Pablo Parés, 2004), *La muerte conoce tu nombre/Death Knows Your Name* (Daniel de la Vega, 2007), and *Dying God* (Fabrice Lambot, 2008). *Dying God* presents a particular compelling case of transnational content and production. The film is a French-Argentine coproduction, written by Argentine scriptwriters, directed by a Frenchman with French, U.S., and Argentine actors speaking in English.

⁴ I will subsequently refer to *Habitaciones para turistas* simply as *Habitaciones*.

⁵ In acknowledging my own geography, I essentially am adhering to Judith Mayne's conception of spectatorship in *Cinema and Spectatorship*. In short, Mayne sees studies of spectatorship as “a mode of encounter” (86) between the films and the critic. The critic is not beyond questions of spectatorship, and s/he is inevitably part of a critic's notion of an ideal viewer, which in my case is contingent on where I view the films.

Violence that Binds: City-Country and Masculine-Feminine Binaries in *Habitaciones para turistas*

Adrián García Bogliano is one among a number of relatively young Argentine filmmakers contributing to the country's emergence as a notable producer of horror cinema.⁶ Like many of his fellow directors, Bogliano's films generally have been made on incredibly low-budgets; *Habitaciones*, for instance, was reportedly made for \$3,000 (Artigas). Working under the auspices of Paura Flics, Bogliano has had a prodigious output, directing, and, at times, co-directing, some 15 feature-length and short films, along with music videos and commercials. The director has attracted attention most recently for the success of *Sudor frío/Cold Sweat* (2010), one of two Argentine horror films to be released in national theatres over the past twenty years and one of the most popular national films of the first half of 2011 ("Las cinco").⁷

Bogliano's films often possess an explicit transnational component, at times evincing an "allusionism" that cuts across genres and national cinemas.⁸ In the credits of both *Habitaciones* and *36 pasos*, a section entitled "Ayuda espiritual" ("Spiritual guidance") appears, which is presumably the director's acknowledgement of certain filmmakers, actors, and films that influenced the making of his own movie. The names form a vast constellation of names and titles from different national cinemas and, at times, media: Lucio Fulci, Frank Miller, Kaneto Shindô, Nicolas Roeg, and Russ Meyer, to name a few. While attempting to dissect Bogliano's two films in light of his professed influences would itself be an exercise in cinephilia, I instead invoke the

⁶ Although hardly an exhaustive list, other notable Argentine horror filmmakers include Daniel de la Vega, FARSA Producciones, Demián Rugna, Fabián Forte, Javier Diment, Sergio Esquenazi, Paula Pollachi, Hernán Findling, Sergio Mazurek, Nicanor Loreti, and Demián Leibovich.

⁷ The other Argentine horror film released in national theatres is Sergio Esquenazi's *Visitante de invierno/Winter's Visitor* (2008). MPI Media Group will distribute *Sudor frío* in the United States and Canada, and the film is set for a theatrical release in those two countries in the fall of 2011.

⁸ In his essay "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (And beyond)," Noël Carroll uses the term "allusionism" to refer to the tendency of Hollywood cinema from the seventies and eighties to reference other films through shots, plot motifs, and dialogue, among other ways (52).

director's acknowledgements as a tangible starting point to consider the transnational dimensions of *Habitaciones* and *36 Pasos*.

As touched on above, my focus on the transnational here deals primarily with the films' content. While transnational in the context of film studies can refer to a multiplicity of elements (distribution, funding, casting, technical personnel, location, etc.), Mette Hjort's taxonomy of "strong vs. weak transnational" and "marked vs. unmarked transnational" (13-14) is helpful for framing my discussion. Here, I limit my analysis to one set of terms proposed by Hjort – marked and unmarked transnationality – which she conceives of as a spectrum that can change from film to film (13). Hjort hypothetically illustrates the idea of marked transnationality through an instance in which the agents working on a film (directors, technicians, producers, actors, etc.) "intentionally direct the attention of viewers towards various transnational properties that encourage thinking about transnationality" through editing and/or cinematography (14). While I refrain from assigning any intentionality to directors, Hjort's remarks are useful. Bogliano's two films imagine both Argentine and U.S. audiences to varying degrees so that the films are recognizable as horror, or, more particularly, slasher films. And yet, the films themselves possess a spectrum of strong and weak moments of transnationality, which, in the case of the weak moments, sometimes give way to national specificity, an *argentinidad*. The national moments by no means entirely preclude U.S. audiences. Such moments only demonstrate a particularity in which the slasher genre elements acquire a national specificity distinct from, say, U.S., Japanese, Italian, or Spanish slasher films.

I conceive the national and transnational in *Habitaciones* and *36 Pasos* through the notion of a cinematic landscape that is open and porous, a conception that is rooted in both film geography and feminist geography. In "Cinematic Landscapes," Chris Lukinbeal delineates a

taxonomy for film geographies and uses the term ‘landscape’ to “emphasize landscape and cinema as a cultural production, a space that is mediated by power relations” (4). As I will discuss below, the cinematic landscapes in Bogliano’s films are distilled both from Argentine cultures and other national cinematic cultures which manifests themselves as part of a global slasher film genre. The presence of genre elements shared between Bogliano’s films and other slasher films from elsewhere points to the open nature of the films’ landscapes and can be framed through one approach to feminist geography as articulated by Doreen Massey in her influential book *Space, Gender, Place*.⁹ According to Massey, “Places are not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks of social relations” (121) and with the identities of places “constructed through the specificity of their interaction with other places rather than their counterposition to them” (121). For Massey, social relations play a crucial role in determining space, gender, and gender relations, and the cinematic landscapes in Bogliano’s films are not solely about images of pampas or streets. The landscapes are also shaped by the relations between characters of different genders, which in the context of a horror film, often acquire a violent dimension. Massey’s ideas also help to consider the national and global cinematic imaginaries that converge in the cinematic landscapes of Bogliano’s films. For Massey, the open nature of a space acquires multiple scales and “[t]he spatial’ ... [is] constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales” (4) from global, national, local, workplace, and home. A similar dynamic is at work in Bogliano’s films. A multiplicity of local, national, and global cinematic landscapes, along with national myths about city-country divisions, render Bogliano’s films slasher movies that are recognizable as slashers for Argentine

⁹ In their essay entitled “Situating Gender,” Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson juxtapose Massey’s ideas with that of Gillian Rose, chiefly her notion of paradoxical space. While Bondi and Davidson confess they are by no means providing an exhaustive outline of the various approaches in feminist geography, Massey’s and Rose’s ideas nevertheless constitute two key approaches in the field.

and U.S. audiences alike. In short, there are national and transnational layers of meaning within the two slasher films' cinematic landscapes.

As intimated above, Bogliano's two films can be deemed global slashers. In his essay "Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism," David Desser alludes to neo-noir as a transnational genre with films, irrespective of their national origin, sharing some common narrative elements such as "The Stranger and the Femme Fatale," "the couple on the run," or "the heist gone bad" (521-524). Similarly, the slasher genre operates as a transnational genre in *Habitaciones* and *36 Pasos* with the films adhering to or manipulating some of the genre's fundamental elements. In *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover delineates a number of characteristics common to slasher films from the U.S., but can be found in slasher films from elsewhere: the sexually disturbed killer, who is usually male (e.g., Norman Bates from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) or Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) (26-30); the Terrible Place, such as a dilapidated house or mansion (30-31); the use of particular weapons like knives, axes, hammers that necessitate a primal and intimate confrontation between a killer and his/her victim (31-32); spectacular instances of graphic screen violence against morally compromised teenagers, with the most gruesome punishment reserved for female characters (32-35, 41); and, last but not least, the final girl who kills or temporarily dispatches the killer (35-41). Besides Clover's book, Richard Nowell's *Blood Money*, a study of U.S. and Canadian slasher films released between 1974 and 1981, reiterates some of Clover's points, but also points to another crucial element of the genre which will come into play in my analysis: the intrigue over the identity of the killer, or killers.

The common locations of slasher films also bear mentioning. Although Clover discusses the city-country binary in the context of rape-revenge films,¹⁰ such a binary is often at play in slasher movies and, as I will discuss below, constitutes a crucial way in which Bogliano's films appropriate one element of the slasher subgenre to infuse them with an Argentine specificity. For Clover, who presupposes audience identification with urbanites or suburbanites, "The point is rural Connecticut (or wherever) [...] is a place where the rules of civilization do not obtain. People from the city are people like us. People from the country [...] are people not like us" (125). Irrespective of the genre, a city-country binary is reinforced through the distinctions between city and rural inhabitants. Rural residents are poor and unhygienic (e.g., the emblematic redneck), while city dwellers are well-heeled and more urbane. In horror films, the warped nature of rural denizens often manifests itself through psychosexual deformities attributed to perverse familial relations and structures. From Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to Rob Zombie's *House of 1,000 Corpses* (2003), examples of sexually twisted hillbillies are in ample supply in the horror genre.

Habitaciones is astutely aware of the slasher genre. Five young women (Theda, Lydia, Ruth, Elena, and Silvia played by Elena Siritto, Victoria Witemburg, Brenda Vera, Jimena Krouco, Mariela Mujica, respectively) from Buenos Aires and La Plata take a bus to a fictitious rural town, San Ramón, where they intend to take a train onto their final destination, Trinidad, another fictitious town. Unknown to each other, all five seek abortions. San Ramón is an economically depressed town pervaded by a strict religiosity. Young men sit idle on the streets, and the newly arrived women witness a spectacular Pentecostal-like religious service during

¹⁰ Rape revenge films are an exploitative subgenre that sometimes crosses over into horror. The narrative pattern typically involves the rape of a woman (or man, in the case of *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972)), her survival, and the victim's eventual revenge against her tormentor, or tormentors, carried out in a most gruesome fashion. Notable examples of rape revenge films are *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave (Day of the Woman)* (Meir Zarchi, 1978). Despite its lowbrow status, it is worth noting that Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring* (1960) is considered the first rape revenge film.

which a preacher performs an exorcism on a town woman (Miriam) before an animated congregation.

The five young women from the city eventually arrive at San Ramón's train station only to be told by an elderly attendant that the train for Trinidad has already passed and another will not come until morning. Nestor, a young man from San Ramón, offers the women a place to stay the night, and they accept. Nestor lives with his infant-like brother, Maxi, in their decrepit family mansion; according to the brothers, their mother burned to death years ago in an accident. Soon after falling asleep in their separate bedrooms, the women are brutally killed by various assailants, one of which is masked, usually wielding knives or an axe. Although the young women fight back and two manage to escape the mansion, only one, Theda, survives the ordeal. Theda, however, is a maimed final girl. After reuniting with her father on the streets of Buenos Aires, he is killed and Theda's eyes are stabbed out by an unseen attacker.

Habitaciones is quickly recognizable as a slasher film to both Argentine and U.S. audiences. The city-country binary, the warped nature of rural residents, screen violence and the weapons used, and the brothers' mansion as a Terrible Place all mark the film as a slasher movie and evidences a transnational give-and-take, so to speak, between Argentina and slasher films aligned with other national cinemas, such as the United States. If the inclusion of slasher genre characteristics in *Habitaciones* highlights the influence of cinema coming from elsewhere (i.e., the give), the film's reformulation of select elements and rendering them Argentine points to a national particularity evident in a cinematic landscape which is inextricably bound with gender and gender relations, a topic I will address later.¹¹

¹¹ The projection of a cinematic landscape in a slasher film that constantly engages with questions of gender is not necessarily unique to Bogliano's films. Slasher films have long been a site to examine questions of gender with movies such as *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* often considered allegories of a particular cultural moment in the U.S. Besides Clover's aforementioned book, Adam Lowenstein's *Shocking Representation* and Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations* examine horror cinema as national allegories and include forays into the slasher genre. Judith Halberstam's *Skin Shows* contains a

The cinematic landscape in *Habitaciones* projects a national dimension, even if it simultaneously forgoes a degree of geographical realism at the local level. In other words, the narrative largely unfolds in a rural national space that is also generically rural. Referring back to Lukinbeal's taxonomy of cinematic landscapes, two such landscapes are termed landscape as space and landscape as place. The cinematic landscape is a space insofar as the camera minimalizes the narrative's location through certain shots (close-ups of characters, low depth of field) rendering location generic and unmoored to an actual location. Cinematic landscape as place, on the other hand, "provides narrative realism by grounding a film to a particular location's sense of place and history" (6), with extreme long shots capturing a city's icons and thus tethering the narrative to a location.

Habitaciones offers up a cinematic landscape that is both space and place. Following the film's opening scene in which a young girl who unintentionally finds a fetus in the trash behind Nestor and Maxi's mansion is murdered by the brothers' mother,¹² the film's rural space is established and tinged with a menacing veneer. As two of the women travelling to San Ramón, Theda and Elena, converse on a bus, the film projects long shots of the country. The soundtrack is composed of the women's conversation and the ominous sounds of a cello. The shots perhaps could come from the rural confines of any number of countries: horses graze, houses sit in open spaces behind fences, and men drive tractors and plant crops. There is no icon that anchors the rural images to a particular Argentine location. Moreover, the names of the towns to which the girls arrive – San Ramón and Trinity – are not actual Argentine towns, but rather metaphorical

helpful chapter focusing on gender in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), and Adam Simon's documentary *The American Nightmare* is also useful for its examination of horror cinema and allegories of U.S. politics and culture during the seventies and eighties.

¹² Nestor and Maxi's mother was the town midwife until she was burned to death for reasons never stated in the film.

designators that reinforce the religious dimension of the countryside (Trinidad) and the theme of abortion (San Ramón is the saint of midwives and expectant mothers).

The cinematic landscape nevertheless achieves its national anchor through other means: the actors' Argentine accents and slang, allusions to Buenos Aires and Mar de Plata, cultural allusions to Argentine cinema, and, of course, abortion. Abortion has been a common theme in horror cinema,¹³ and, given recent attacks on women's access to abortion in the United States by right-wing legislatures and religious groups,¹⁴ *Habitaciones*' allegorization of abortion and violence against women would not be lost on U.S. viewers. The abortion theme nevertheless acquires an Argentine resonance in the film given the geographical context. Abortion in Argentina remains illegal with many women attempting to terminate a pregnancy themselves or, in the case of upper class women, seeking abortions in private medical offices (Selser). *Habitaciones* makes abortion a narrative centerpiece and, in accordance with the genre's logic, ultimately affects the maimed condition of the film's final girl, Theda. In her discussion of the typical victims of slasher films, Clover observes, "Postcoital death, above all when the circumstances are illicit, is a staple of the genre" (33). With all the young women in *Habitaciones* already having engaged in intercourse, not only is their survival put into doubt, but also the possibility of any final girl emerging unscathed (again, Theda's eyes are stabbed out at the film's conclusion).

The film's projection of a national allegory about abortion is linked with a city-country binary that is itself linked with a gender binary: male/country and female/city. The aforementioned binaries rest on a fixing of locations and gender identities. According to Massey,

¹³ Abortion is a common theme in horror cinema and is narrativized in *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974), and *Progeny* (Brian Yuzna, 1998), among other films.

¹⁴ See, for example, Erik Eckholm's article in *The New York Times* entitled "Across the Country, Lawmakers Push Abortion Curbs."

there are multiple identities of place with such identities holding different meanings for different people (121-122). In *Habitaciones*, the multiplicity of a place's meaning is reduced to create the binaries that hold for most of the film. For the males of San Ramón, the country is a lawless space beyond the reach of the state that accords them a liberty to murder and a means of financial survival. As the town preacher Horacio (Oscar Ponce) states to Theda towards the end of the film, besides killing the young women from the city seeking abortion, the men take the money intended for the medical procedure and use it to support the economically depressed town. In contrast to San Ramón's men, for a lone woman from a city seeking an illegal abortion, the country is a brazenly sinister landscape that takes on a metaphoric dimension.

To again turn to Lukinbeal's taxonomy, cinematic landscape can acquire a metaphoric facet. Lukinbeal makes the distinction between small and large metaphors, with small metaphors acting similar to "rhetoric devices or literary tropes [... which] naturalize cultural stereotypes about landscape" (13) and large ones "structuring research paradigms" (14).¹⁵ *Habitaciones* uses the city-country binary as a small metaphor that structures the relationship between the film's onscreen rural landscape and the largely offscreen urban landscape. Bogliano's film inevitably taps into Sarmiento's *civilización y barbarie* dichotomy which juxtaposed an enlightened Buenos Aires with its surrounding rural areas. For Sarmiento, both the land itself and its inhabitants constitute a savagery beyond the confines of the city: "To the south and the north, savages lurk, waiting for moonlit nights to descend, like a pack of hyenas, on the herds that graze the countryside, and on defenseless settlements. [...] If it is not the proximity of savages that worries the man of the countryside, it is the fear of a tiger stalking him, of a viper he might step on" (46).

¹⁵ Lukinbeal borrows the distinction large and small metaphors from an entry entitled 'metaphor' in Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, and Watts (2000).

Habitaciones dialogue is not exclusively with Sarmiento's articulation of national space, but with also its various manifestations that appear in Argentine cultural production. As Ana Laura Lusnich states in her introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Civilización y barbarie en el cine argentino y latinoamericano*, "[d]esde 1845, fecha de la publicación del *Facundo* de Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *civilización y barbarie* se han constituido en conceptos clave no solo en las explicaciones de los procesos históricos y culturales sino también en la producción de textos artísticos" (13).¹⁶ With specific attention given to Argentine cinema, the collection of essays edited by Lusnich attest to the persistence of the *civilización y barbarie* dichotomy in national cinema ranging from *Nobleza Gaucha* (Humberto Cairo, Ernesto Gunche, Eduardo Martínez de la Pera, 1915) to *El bonarense* (Pablo Trapero, 2002).

Habitaciones, of course, offers its own projection of the Sarmiento's formulation, and, as touched on above, the film's city-country binary dialogues with the binary as it figures into other global cinematic genres such as the slasher, the Western, or even road movies. To focus specifically on the film's engagement with the slasher, in *Habitaciones* the country and its inhabitants create a threatening cinematic landscape that is predetermined by the slasher genre. The slasher's cinematic landscape is hardly a pleasant place. As Clover and Nowell intimated above in the case of the dilapidated mansion as Terrible Place, the onscreen space of the slasher is paramount to the genre as enabling a threat, namely a killer, to carry out his or her designs. The rural confines of *Habitaciones* are not a site in which a heroic character sets out to prove his valor in battle, or offer a placid refuge from the city's stresses as in *El Viento se llevó lo que / Wind with the Gone* (Alejandro Agresti, 1998). Instead, the Argentine countryside is menacing, lurking, and ominous precisely because the narrative is focalized through young women seeking

¹⁶ "Since 1845, the publication date of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's *Facundo, Civilization and Barbarity* has constituted a key concept not only in historical and cultural explanations, but also in artistic production."

abortions in a slasher film, a genre which dictates a cinematic landscape to be a menace. The film's formalist characteristics – ominous music, high contrast lighting, claustrophobic camera angles, and tight onscreen spaces – render the Argentine countryside a Terrible Place that is gendered masculine, particularly a hostile and misogynistic mode of masculinity.

The Argentine countryside as a masculine space is a counterpoint to a feminine city. The young women from Buenos Aires and La Plata are generally urbane, at least more so than their rural and male counterparts. One of the women, Silvia, studies filmmaking in La Plata and talks to Nestor about the merits of contemporary Argentine cinema, while Nestor relates how the town cinema was long ago replaced by religion. The country/male and city/female binary is reinforced in dialogue: all the women from the city express unease or even hatred for the country. Horacio, San Ramón's preacher, remarks that everyone who comes from the city is an atheist.

Screen violence, specifically the kinds of violence used by male and female characters, further cements the city/female and rural/male binary. The most graphic incidents transpire within the brothers' mansion, a labyrinthine interior space in which violence looms for the different heroines, and the screen violence is gendered male by its aggression and graphic nature. Silvia is decapitated, Ruth is hacked to death, and Lydia is shot in the head by Maxi. Feminine violence, in contrast, is purely defensive with the women fighting back against their various assailants for the sake of survival.

If the mansion is the primary site of violence, the violence is hardly contained within its walls. The misogyny is much more dispersed giving way to a widely enveloping threat that encompasses not a single house, but rather an entire town and countryside. If Theda and Elena manage to escape from the house, there is no refuge. The entire town is invested in the enterprise of killing young women seeking abortions. The elderly train station attendant pretends to

telephone the police, but the line is cut. Theda, however, temporarily saves herself from a pursuing mob by answering the church telephone and informs her father of her pregnancy, her decision to keep the baby, and states that Horacio, the town preacher, will drive her home to Buenos Aires, a potential safe haven.

The city and country, however, are not separate spaces. In the case of *Habitaciones*, the two are conjoined through a circulation of violence that mirrors the circulation of a misogynistic religion. Soon after stepping out of the car and meeting her father on a sidewalk, Theda notices a church across the street from her apartment and hears the militant chants of ¡Arde! ¡Arde! ('Burn! Burn!') similar to what she heard in San Ramón. Within moments, Theda father's is killed in the streets of Buenos Aires by an unseen assailant, and Theda's eyes are stabbed. She falls on the sidewalk as a crowd gathers around and blood pours from her face. Theda's survival as a maimed final girl speaks to a hopelessness of political action to change abortion laws in Argentina in the face of a powerful Catholic church.¹⁷ A town of zealot men collectively constitutes an unrelenting killer that figure into many slasher films. Just as Michael Myers and Jason Vorhees break through countless windows and doors, evade authority, and return in multiple sequels and remakes, the men of San Ramón pursue Theda to the city. Violence against women seeking abortion seems ubiquitous and constant; neither city nor country affords refuge.

Bikini Kill: Masculine and Feminine Violence in *36 Pasos*

36 Pasos performs a similar negation of Sarmiento's city-country binary through a circulation of violence. Six young women (Priscila, Violeta, Marilú, Pilar, Flor, and Emilia played by Priscila Rauto, Andrea Duarte, Melisa Fernández, Noelia Balbo, Priscila Caldera, and

¹⁷ According to a report written by Nina Zamberlin for despenalización.org.ar, a group dedicated to the legalization of abortion in Argentina, since 1984 some 30 bills have been proposed to decriminalize abortion in all or some circumstances. None of bills have been successful.

Ariana Marchioni, respectively) all attended the same school growing up. The women are kidnapped from various places (a parking garage, an apartment, a country road, a parking lot outside a school, and a stadium) and taken to an isolated rural home. There, the women are forced to obey a regiment of rules based upon obligatory fun, “armonía” (‘harmony’), and “coexistencia,” (‘coexistence’) with other rules elaborated in voiceovers spoken by Pilar and which are recited at the film’s conclusion: “‘Tengo que aprender a callar. Tengo que tolerar. Tengo que escuchar. Tengo que ceder. Toda coexistencia armónica’” (“‘I have to be quiet. I have to tolerate. I have to listen. I have to yield. All a harmonious coexistence.’”). The perpetrators of the kidnappings are a family of a former classmate, Tamara, who the six young women bullied in grade school. *36 Pasos* foregrounds female vengeance, and Tamara’s family subject the young women to a twisted game of survival. Besides adhering to the aforementioned rules during their captivity, the women must wear bikinis, prepare a birthday party for Tamara, and maim or ‘discipline’ one another with poison or other means if they are to have any chance of surviving their ordeal. Tamara eventually arrives to the country home pretending to be another young woman (Lucia) and takes her place among the others in order to carry out the final parts of an intricate and vengeful plot. Only one girl survives, Pilar, and, at the film’s end, she is forced to remain with the family and partake in a macabre birthday celebration for Tamara.

As mentioned above, *36 Pasos* does not exclusively fit into the slasher subgenre, although the film possesses a number of slasher elements. Extreme violence is committed primarily against women often with weapons such as a chainsaw, branding iron, sledgehammer, and butcher knife. The house, or rather property, to which the women are confined is a Terrible Place par excellence situated in a rural space in which the women’s cell phones do not function. Tamara’s family is a warped collective consisting of a domineering mother, a physically

imposing but childlike brother, a sadistic sister, and a reserved but vicious uncle. Finally, although Clover and other academic critics have generally overlooked how the slasher narratives often revolve around a holiday,¹⁸ the significance of Tamara's birthday is an additional nod to the slasher genre. The film can thus be considered, at least in part, a slasher film by both Argentine and U.S. audiences, along with those elsewhere.

Akin to *Habitaciones*, *36 Pasos* acquires its *argentinidad* in different ways. The actors' Argentine accents and slang, along with the majority of diegetic and non-diegetic music, help to anchor the cinematic landscape to Argentina. Actors' allusions to politicians and musicians Sandro and Leandro Favio also highlight the film's national origins. Finally, while not national icons in the sense of the Obelisco or the Casa Rosada in Buenos Aires, images of Estadio Jorge Luis Hirschi, the stadium of the soccer club Estudiantes in La Plata, and buildings emblazoned with the words 'La Plata,' at times render the film's cinematic landscape a place. A generic countryside is juxtaposed with the specificity of some urban places. The film's rural cinematic landscape lacks any geographical realism beyond being "dos horas de la ciudad" ("two hours from the city") outside Buenos Aires.

Cultural references aside, the city-country binary reminiscent of the *civilización y barbarie* binary remains at work, albeit in a muted form compared to *Habitaciones*. *36 Pasos* lacks the sharp and reiterated contrasts between city and country that appeared in the other film discussed above. There are no pronounced generalizations about country dwellers and inhabitants of the city or a corresponding binary between city-country and masculine-feminine. The country nevertheless occasionally acquires a gender as a misogynistic space in which

¹⁸ Slasher films that revolve around holidays are numerous and include *Black Christmas*, *Halloween*, *My Bloody Valentine* (George Milhaka, 1981), *Happy Birthday to Me*, *Graduation Day*, *April Fool's Day* (Fred Walton, 1986), *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (Charles E. Sellier Jr., 1984), and *You Better Watch Out* (Lewis Jackson, 1980).

women are either reduced to prostitutes or captives. At the film's outset, two young men from the city are driving in the countryside at night in search of a bordello about which one of the young men's grandfathers had spoken. The men tease each other, tell jokes, and poke fun at each other's mothers. While the country operates as a site for potential sexual adventures for the young men, the space takes on a historical dimension through one character's reference to Juan Perón and Argentine industrialization. According to the young man, the bordello is leftover from the 1940s during which truck drivers would drive to different factories in the countryside and would frequent prostitutes. The countryside thus was and, given the expectations of the men, remains a place in which sexual relationships with women are merely a question of money. When the men accidentally hit a bikini-clad woman fleeing from Tamara's family's house, the men's desire for sex appears thwarted. Assuming the point-of-view of one of the young men, the camera passes over the young woman's dismembered body and pauses briefly on one of her breast which is exposed. Soon afterwards the two young men get back into the car and leave the woman for dead. While one voices his opinion that his grandfather was correct about the brothel, Tamara's brother steps out onto the road. The country is thus cast as a perilous space for women; they are expendable either for sex or a game of vengeance.

The countryside as a hostile and misogynistic space is given an additional historical layer specific to Argentina through a recurring non-diegetic song and its accompanying images. At various points during *36 Pasos*, the soundtrack contains a slightly out of tune guitar slowly strumming the nursery rhyme song "Diez Indiancitos" with lyrics in Spanish: "Uno, dos, tres indiancitos" ("One, two, three little Indians"). As the music plays, one sees images of the young women engaged in obligatory fun such as playing with a water hose or swimming. Another instance in which the song is played in the latter half of the film, the accompanying images are

more dire. The kidnapped women sit together in an open yard with their hands bound and heads covered by white hoods.

Such a sequence is a complicated invocation of the historical violence committed in the Argentine countryside, namely state violence against indigenous inhabitants and the kidnapping and captivity of white women by indigenous tribes. To hear “Diez Indiancitos” over images of the Argentine countryside recalls the military campaigns of the nineteenth-century such as *La Conquista del desierto* that decimated rural indigenous communities in Patagonia and subsequent policies such as breaking apart indigenous families and selling children and women to urban families and conscripting indigenous men into Argentina’s military.¹⁹ While similar policies were carried out elsewhere in the country, the Argentine countryside is indeed a site of extermination and colonization, and yet, the allusion in *36 Pasos* grows more complicated with an ostensible linking of victim and victimizer. White women were often kidnapped in indigenous raids. Tamara’s family’s incursions into La Plata to kidnap their daughter’s former classmates link the rural family to the nation’s indigenous.

Forging a connection between country residents and Native Americans is a common motif in U.S. horror cinema and, as with the other elements of the genre, can be familiar to U.S. viewers acquainted with the horror genre. As Clover notes, the “mountain family” in *The Hills Have Eyes* and “redneck clans” in the various installments of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Hunter’s Blood* (Robert C. Hughes, 1986), and *Deliverance* resemble Native Americans, or caricatures of Native Americans, in U.S. cinema, through costumes, acting, and displacement of rural denizens in the name of development (134-137). Horror cinema allusions aside, the “Diez Indiancitos” sequences also recalls similar policies of extermination and colonization of

¹⁹ See, for example, Carlos Martínez Sarasola’s *Nuestros Paisanos los indios* (1992).

indigenous tribes and the captivity of white women in the United States.²⁰ *36 Pasos*, in turn, invokes a specific chapter in Argentine history and simultaneously recalls a comparable dynamic in U.S. history.

One may be tempted to ask who is coded white and who is coded indigenous in *36 Pasos*. Such a question is unanswerable due to the film's blurring of history and violence. Susana Rotker's *Captive Women* details how an official Argentine discourse of whitening historically omitted indigenous and Afro-Argentines and narratives by captive white women. For Rotker, a captive woman's white body functions as a site in which indigenous and white cultures converge: "[t]he body of the captive is the place of encounter, of contagion, of confrontation and defeat, of racial mixing, of questioning the official discourse, about the 'reality' of the other side" (125). A similar convergence occurs in *36 Pasos*, although, as discussed above, the historical blurring between white and indigenous cultures does not hinge exclusively on the bodies of Tamara's classmates. The captive women's bodies in Bogliano's film are only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. The dynamic of kidnapping by a rural white family, the use of "Diez Indiancitos" coupled with images of white women bound and hooded, and the film's location in the Argentine countryside entangle national histories of racial and gendered violence. Sorting out who is white and who is indigenous is beside the point; projecting the entanglement is what is crucial.

The screen violence in *36 Pasos* reinforces the violent dimension of the rural cinematic landscape. The violence, however, is committed by both males and females and, as in *Habitaciones*, broaches the question of gendered forms of violence based on performativity. Violence has sometimes been construed as the sole prerogative of males. According to Hillary

²⁰ See Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: the Mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1860*.

Neroni, “[s]erving as a fundamental signifier of masculinity, we not only consider violence more the province of men than women, but it is also an activity that inevitably enhances a man’s masculinity as much as it would conversely detract from a woman’s femininity” (42). While Neroni’s point is certainly valid, gendered forms of violence are more variegated in slasher films, and the genre creates its own expectations for gendered violence. Screen violence committed by a male killer hardly constitutes a surprise, and the defensive violence of the final girl is another staple of the genre.²¹ Sometimes operating as a nuance, the possibility of a female killer further undermines absolutist notions of gendered violence, specifically the idea that women are incapable of aggression. Whether violence is gendered as masculine or feminine in a slasher film can thus depend on any number of factors, particularly the performative aspect, such as weapons, and/or causes of violence.

The gendered forms of violence in *36 Pasos* gives Bogliano’s film a specificity vis-à-vis slasher films from elsewhere and projects a national allegory about gender relations and patriarchy that is relevant in other countries, including the United States. The presence of violent women, however, gives the film an Argentine specificity and allegorizes the increasing role of women in Argentine society, albeit tinged with a pessimistic skepticism. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s assumption of the Argentine presidency and, prior to her election, Felisa Miceli’s and Nilda Garré’s appointments as economic and defense ministers, respectively, represent symbolic gains for women in Argentine society (Di Marco). Bogliano’s film, however, poses the question whether the presence of women will mean a change in a patriarchal society – a question that is ever so relevant to U.S. society as well – or rather, business will proceed as usual.

²¹ Slasher films with aggressive female killers include *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1980), *Happy Birthday to Me*, *Graduation Day*, and *Haute Tension/High Tension* (Alexandre Aja, 2003).

The dynamic of business as usual is largely broached through gendered screen violence in *36 Pasos*. Masculine violence is aggressive and serves to set up the vengeful game through kidnapping or, within the context of Tamara's family's house, masculine violence also regulates and ensures the realization of the revenge plot. Male violence disciplines the women, and Tamara's brother and uncle are stationed in a shack close to the house where the women are held captive. While we never see any video cameras suggesting surveillance, the captive women reside in a panopticon.²² When one of the women, Violeta, dismisses the game and its rules and announces her intention to escape, Tamara's brother quickly enters the house and viciously knocks her in the head with a sledgehammer.

The film's feminine violence, on the other hand, grows more aggressive and graphic as the film progresses to its chaotic end in which any strict notions of gendered violence is upended. For almost the entire film, feminine violence is limited to occasional bullying among the young women who are kidnapped. They bicker with each other over who is to perform certain chores in the house. The kidnapped women periodically find envelopes around the house that command them to do certain tasks or instruct them where to find objects such as bullets, which foreshadow an ominous conclusion. Arguing aside, feminine violence remains within acceptable norms. On two occasions, Marilú is ordered to place poison in the food and drink of another captive woman Priscilla, an act that remains within the realm of feminine violence. Again to refer to Neroni, who comments on U.S. society in the nineteenth-century, "[p]oisoning was acceptable because it was ladylike; it was (theoretically) nonviolent" (65).

²² The late eighteenth-century philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham designed the panopticon as an architectural structure intended for use as a prison. The objective was that all prisoners could be seen, although those same prisoners could not discern if they were being watched.

If bullying and poison conform to expectations of feminine violence, the conclusion of *36 Pasos* foils those expectations to an unprecedented degree for a slasher film in which feminine violence is often legitimated through defense against a male assailant (Dika 129). Concomitant with the arrival of Tamara, the violence among and against the captive women is ramped up. As stated above, Marilú poisons Priscila, and Tamara's brother chops off Emilia's finger for failing to reign in Tamara's feigned ignorance of the house's rules. Marilú attempts to spray a cleaner in Emilia's eyes, and Pilar knocks Marilú in the head with the ceramic top of a toilet. When Marilú recovers and finds a gun in the toilet's cistern, the violence reaches a crescendo. Emilia is taken to a shed and, in a particularly gruesome scene, is branded on her mouth. Both Emilia and Marilú are enraged, and the entire 'game' descends into violent anarchy. Marilú begins to wildly fire the pistol at her fellow captives. Emilia brandishes a chainsaw and cuts down Marilú and then seeks out her captors only to be deterred by Tamara's sister holding a rifle. Emilia realizes Tamara's actual identity and seeks her out as well, only to be cut down with a nail gun by Pilar, who also soon realizes Tamara's actual identity.

Aggressive feminine violence at the film's conclusion violates the film's previous system of gendered violence in which masculine violence maintained the unfolding of a plot. Nothing better signals the disturbance of the system than Tamara's uncle fleeing into the cornfields at the site of Emilia brandishing a chainsaw. Emilia's use of the chainsaw and Marilú's firing a pistol achieve a kind of violence previously reserved for Tamara's brother and uncle. The site of an enraged female brings to mind Neroni's comments that horror films from the seventies (e.g., *Halloween*) and eighties (e.g., *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)) "can only imagine a woman as capable of violence if she is entirely enraged, and this anger can only occur when she is tortured, violated, and pushed into a state of total fright" (31).

36 Pasos traces an upward curve of feminine screen violence that progresses from bullying to poison to guns and chainsaws. The captive women are indeed pushed into an enraged state, but it is useful to ask by whom. The feminine violence is not committed against a male aggressor nor is it purely defensive. Instead, Bogliano's film is a critique of patriarchy, albeit a patriarchy that lacks a visible male head. The kidnapped women are forced to wear bikinis, perform a synchronized dance reminiscent of something on MTV, and obey a system of rules that effectively renders them passive. Through the flashbacks to the women's lives prior to their kidnapping, most of them are ambitious in their careers, school, or athletic teams. Violence, nevertheless, is not entirely beyond the women. During a flashback to Marilú's kidnapping, we see her working as a party organizer. When another woman refuses to wear a bikini and jump out of a cake because she does not want to degrade herself, Marilú browbeats her into complying with her wishes when she tells the woman that the room will be full of producers. Marilú exhibits an internalized patriarchy that permits a kind of feminine violence (i.e., bullying) and objectification of women for her own ends, namely her career. The idea of patriarchy without a male figurehead is reiterated in a particular harrowing sequence three-quarters the way through the film. After Priscila and Emilia talk about their vague memories of Tamara, the scene cuts to a sequence in which the kidnapped women are nude and bound in a kind device that fits around their necks and holds their wrists. There see strobe-like lighting and the camera cuts to different images of the bound women. Tamara's sister appears holding various signs that read "SILENCIO" ("SILENCE") and "OBEDIENCIA" ("OBEDIENCE"), and Tamara's brother wields a sledgehammer or makes whipping gestures, as if the kidnapped women are being tamed. At the end of sequence, Tamara's sister holds a sign that reads "FELICIDAD" ("HAPPINESS"), and the women are set free upon repeating the sign and smiling. While it may be construed that

the women are being trained to conform to some kind of patriarchal conception of women as passive, the male figurehead in the sequence, Tamara's brother, is not in charge. Tamara's mother appears as the ultimate authority, the one who wields power within the family structure.

Whether patriarchy ultimately causes violence is complicated within the confines of Tamara's family's house. Again, no male figure exercises control over the vengeful plot. At best, Tamara's brother and uncle serve more as enforcers with Tamara and her mother occupying more commanding, albeit obscured, roles. Tamara and her mother command the rules of the game with male figures ensuring the game's direction with extreme acts. Tamara and her mother impose patriarchy for the sake of vengeance as retribution for women's actions against Tamara years earlier. As leaders of the plot, the mother and daughter help kidnap, brutalize, subjugate, and objectify the other women without ever actually performing a violent act. And yet, as intimated above, both male and female figures perform masculine and feminine kinds of violence with Tamara's brother and the kidnapped women committing the most extreme (i.e., masculine) acts. If the film's violence creates a spectrum of feminine and masculine forms of violence, the masculine forms of violence committed by women against other women permits such a dynamic of violence to constitute the film's climax. A feminine vengeance is consummated through masculine violence performed by women against women.

Conclusion

Habitaciones and *36 Pasos* engage with binaries of gender and landscape that can be traced to either national myths and/or the slasher genre. If the films allegorize those binaries, they also undermine their supposed polarities and provide their own take on the city/country and masculine/feminine violence dichotomies. And while violence links the city and country in *Habitaciones*, in *36 Pasos* the country becomes a site in which feminine and masculine violence

appears ostensibly identical. The mixing of such binaries gives Bogliano's films a particularity that frequently acquires a national dimension, which does not necessarily shut out U.S. audiences, but merely points to the film's different layers of reception according to a viewer's location, or better, a viewer's attention to and awareness of national and cultural contexts.

Habitaciones and *36 Pasos* both conform to generic criteria of the slasher and possess a level of specificity distinct from slasher films from elsewhere thus highlighting how certain horror subgenres have achieved a transnational status akin to other more esteemed film genres such as the Western and film noir. The distribution of Bogliano's films, as well as those of other Argentine horror directors, in markets outside Argentina, point to circuits of exchange between Argentina and elsewhere, such as the United States, Germany, Japan, and Italy. However small, the presence of Argentine horror cinema in markets such as the United States, suggests the traffic in horror cinema fortunately moves both ways. If screen violence can bind city and country, it can also jump borders and, in effect, bind national markets and audiences who have common tastes and thus create a transnational demand for film genres such as the slasher.

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