Monstrously Barren: The Horror of the Childless Mother in Peruvian Thriller

*El vientre*

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Abstract:

Daniel Rodríguez Risco’s *El vientre* (*The Womb*, 2014) was a box-office success in Peru and reached an international audience thanks to its run on HBO Latino and FOX Latin America. The film’s villain, Silvia (Vanessa Saba), is a 45-year-old widow who will stop at nothing to get what she wants. In this case, what she wants is to raise a baby since she was never able to carry a pregnancy to term. It is this monstrous barrenness that unhinges her and, in turn, renders her unbearable to the audience. In this study, the author examines *El vientre*’s baby-crazed protagonist through the lens of film theorist Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine, considers what exactly makes Silvia horrific, and explores ways in which the cinematography reinforces her monstrosity to the audience.

Introduction to *El vientre*

Lauded as the country’s first legitimate psychological thriller, Daniel Rodríguez Risco’s *El vientre* (*The Womb*, 2014) was a box-office success in Peru and reached an international audience thanks to its run on HBO Latino and FOX Latin America. The film’s ominous tagline, “What she wants is inside of you,” warns the spectator of the predatory villain, Silvia (Vanessa Saba), a 45-year-old widow who will stop at nothing to get what she wants. Unable to carry a pregnancy to term and bear her own child, Silvia desperately wants to raise a baby. Her barrenness unhinges her and, in turn, renders her unbearable to the audience. In this study, I examine *El vientre*’s baby-crazed protagonist through the lens of film theorist Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous-feminine, which she defines as “what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (1). Is it the excess of maternal desire that makes Silvia monstrous? Is it her status as a childless woman in a society that glorifies the maternal? Is it her aging body that stands in contrast to the vitality and fecundity of Mercedes (Mayella Lloclla), the young maid Silvia hires under the guise of cleaning her stately home? In what follows, I consider what exactly makes Silvia horrific and the ways in which the cinematography reinforces her monstrosity to the audience.

Historically, Peruvian cinema has not been known for popular genre films, but rather for socially relevant works that privilege the auteur and are aimed at an international audience, or in the words of film historian Jeffrey Middents, films that are “technically proficient and exportable” (2). The popularity of Ricardo Maldonado’s recent comedies, ¡Asu Mare! (2013) and ¡Asu Mare! 2 (2015), as well as the found footage horror films *Cementerio general* (General Cemetery, 2013) and *Cementerio general 2* (2015), marks a shift from what was traditionally considered representative of national cinema. Capitalizing on the success of the *Cementerio general* franchise, the popularity of Peruvian horror films
reached its peak in 2014, leading to a number of debuts in recent years, including *La cara del diablo* (*Face of the Devil*, 2014), written by *El vientre* star Vanessa Saba, *Secreto Matusita* (*The Secret of Matusita*, 2014), *El demónio de los Andes* (*Demon of the Andes*, 2014), *La entidad* (*The Entity*, 2015), *Muerte en los Andes* (*Death in the Andes*, 2015), and *No estamos solos* (*We Are Not Alone*, 2016). Critics tend to classify *El vientre*, which was originally promoted as a horror movie, as a psychological thriller or suspense film (Zavala par. 1). For the purposes of this study, it is also possible to interpret the film as an example of the hybrid sub-genre commonly referred to as psychological horror, given that the emotional instability of villain Silvia is what most unsettles the audience.

Peruvian director Daniel Rodríguez Risco shifted from working as a businessman and university administrator to focus on a filmmaking career in the late 1990s, when he formally trained at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, founded a production company, and began to write and direct short films. His first full-length feature was the drama *El acuarelista* (*The Watercolorist*, 2008), which he followed with the thriller *El vientre*, the horror film *No estamos solos*, and the dramedy *Siete semillas* (*Seven Seeds*, 2016). Rodríguez Risco originally wrote *El vientre* in 2000, but reworked the script with his brother, Gonzalo Rodríguez Risco, ten years later. The pair won co-production funds from the competitive Fondo Ibermedia, which enabled them to move forward with the project. After five weeks of rehearsal, the cast and crew filmed *El vientre* in just 26 days between May and June 2012 (Rojas par. 4). In interviews, the director emphasized that a small but talented crew worked with limited resources, utilizing a Red One digital camera, a few lights, a dolly, and—for one day only—a crane (Rojas par. 12). Despite being dubbed “controversial” by the national media for its exploration of “the dark side of motherhood,” the film was awarded the 2013 National Competition for Post-production Projects of Feature-Length Films to help cover post-production costs and broke Peru’s box-office record for the opening weekend of a national film (Ibermedia par. 6). Rodríguez Risco has already announced the forthcoming sequel, *El vientre 2*, with shooting scheduled to begin in summer 2017 (Ugarelli par. 17).

Rodríguez Risco’s original script was inspired by Catherine Deneuve’s portrayal of aloof women who avenge the men who hurt them in the films *Repulsion* (1965) and *Tristana* (1970). He also has referenced popular North American thrillers *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Misery* (1990) as initial influences on *El vientre*. Rodríguez Risco’s fascination with “beautiful, damaged women” (Zelaya Miñano par. 11) clearly manifests itself in his protagonist Silvia, whom he has described as “calculating” and “subtly frigid,” and to whom the film’s website refers as “unhinged,” “obsessed,” and “desperate.” As *El vientre* progresses, the viewer will notice connections not only to the female protagonists of the aforementioned films, but also to the literary and cinematic manifestations of *Great Expectations*’s Miss Havisham: just as Dickens’s eccentric spinster surrounded herself with relics from her long-ago wedding, Silvia stockpiles outdated baby food and clothing and keeps an antique brass crib in her bedroom. Similarly, spectators will recognize traces of Rebecca De Mornay’s chilling portrayal of a nanny who attempts to usurp her employer in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992).

Having consulted with experts in psychosis, Rodríguez Risco, in agreement with Vanessa Saba, decided not to depict Silvia as a deranged woman but rather as someone fully committed to her mission to have a baby (Romero Carrillo par. 7). In the director’s words, the film tackles “the dark side of maternal desire. The story originated when, through a personal experience, I discovered that something as
beautiful as maternal desire, upon becoming obses-
sive, could be distorted into something dangerous.”

The Monstrous-Feminine and Monstrous
Wombs

Barbara Creed’s foundational work on the mon-
strous-feminine serves as the theoretical basis for my
analysis of El vientre’s protagonist Silvia, who embod-
ies “what it is about woman that is shocking, terrify-
ing, horrific, abject” (1). Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s
discussion of the abject in Powers of Horror, Creed
specifies three ways that the horror film illustrates
abjection: the numerous visual images of abjection
that appear on screen—including blood, excrement,
and corpses; the crossing of borders as an inherent
aspect of monstrosity; and the construction of the
mother or maternal figure as ab-
ject (11). Creed defends the
need for a more precise term
than female monster, in her view
an overly simplistic antithesis of
the male monster, since the horror
of the monstrous-feminine dif-
ers significantly from that of
the male monster. The role of
gender, she argues, cannot be
separated from the construc-
tion of woman as monstrous or
the unique ways in which female monstrosity horri-
fies the audience (3). Moreover, Creed maintains that
“when woman is represented as monstrous it is al-
most always in relation to her mothering and repro-
ductive functions,” noting that one of the various
ways in which the monstrous woman tends to be
characterized is the monstrous womb (7).

The film’s title itself evokes Kristeva’s reading of
the term chora, synonymous with “receptacle” and
often translated from the Greek as “womb,” that she
borrows from Plato’s dialogue Timaeus. Kristeva ex-
pands on Plato’s notion of the chora as a “nourishing
and maternal” space by conceptualizing it as “the
place where the subject is both generated and ne-
gated” (“Semiotic Chora” 26, 28), a site of creation
as well as destruction. The maternal body functions
as a receptacle somewhere between the semiotic and
the symbolic, or in Kristeva’s words, “what mediates
the symbolic law organizing social relations and be-
comes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora”
(28). In the case of El vientre, Silvia’s maternal body
never succeeds in producing a subject that transi-
tions from the semiotic to the symbolic. It is worth
noting, then, that the protagonist’s very name—Sil-
via, from the Latin root silva or “forest”—indicates
her proximity to the natural world, a realm that is not
fully human and does not respect the parameters of
the symbolic.

The monstrous womb indicated by the film’s title there-
fore is not that of the character who actually is pregnant
on screen. On the contrary, Mer-
cedes is portrayed as youthful,
innocent, and virtuous, despite
her dalliance with Jaime (Ma-
nuel Gold), and even after she
becomes pregnant, her body is
not presented as repulsive or
threatening. It is, in fact, ideal-
ized by means of the accentuation of Mercedes’s
health and innocence, not to mention her associa-
tion with the Virgin Mary vis-à-vis her first name—
in Spanish the Virgin is often referred to as María de
las Mercedes (Our Lady of Mercy)—and the poster of
the Holy Mother that she hangs in her new room in
Silvia’s house. The movie suggests that Mercedes has
the power to bring about a bright future because of
her ability to bear a child, as evidenced by the sun-
soaked shots of the film’s final scene. She is the
film’s final girl, that stock character of the horror
genre “whose story we follow from beginning to
end, and the one from whose vantage, even through
whose eyes, we see the action; and it is she who, at

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the end of the film, brings the killer down” (Glover x). Despite the lingering stigma of single motherhood in twenty-first century Peru (Manohar and Busse-Cárdenas), Mercedes is glorified throughout the film as life-giving and life-affirming.

In *El vientre*, then, pregnancy itself is not construed as innately horrifying. The womb that is monstrous is the one that remains unseen: never having produced a healthy child, Silvia’s womb is the one that repulses society. Her lack of progeny not only disgusts but also terrifies due to its failure to comply with social expectations for married women, especially women of her standing. The horror of Silvia’s dysfunctional maternal body is illustrated on screen in a pivotal scene, discussed in more detail below, in which she shows Mercedes an album that contains photos of her dead fetuses. Silvia’s ability to conceive already aligns her with the abject, but it is her inability to give birth to a healthy child that makes her womb truly monstrous.

**Framing Female Monstrosity in *El vientre***

*El vientre* takes place in Chosica, a rural area east of Lima that once served as a mountainside resort town for aristocratic city dwellers. Wealthy widow Silvia, who lives alone in a large, stately home outside of town, hires young Mercedes to clean and care for the house. Mercedes becomes involved romantically with Jaime, Silvia’s handyman, and soon finds herself pregnant. Unbeknownst to the young couple, Silvia orchestrates their relationship from the beginning, planning to keep their child for herself. However, she does not anticipate resistance from a pair of peniless adolescents. While Mercedes and Jaime attempt to defy her at every turn, it becomes clear that Silvia will do whatever is necessary to claim the baby as her own. As the puzzle of Silvia’s past is pieced together, Mercedes’s future grows more precarious.

Set in a local slaughterhouse, the opening sequence of *El vientre* begins in a hand-held shooting style that captures the din of a squealing pig running from the hands of a butcher before cutting to a series of images of raw meat and animal parts. The camera then moves its focus to two young women, one of whom is Mercedes, and tilts down to a split-second detail shot of Mercedes’s hands, backgrounded by her white blood-stained apron, as they slice through pig flesh (Fig. 1). Following a close-up of Mercedes’s face, a straight cut leads viewers to Silvia, who is shot slightly from below and framed by a window in a wall separating the kill floor from the rest of the slaughterhouse (Fig. 2). These initial glimpses of the protagonists presage both the physical and psychological horror that characterize the remainder of the film. First, the shots of Mercedes foreshadow the violent deaths of innocent secondary characters and,
more importantly, her bloody conflict with Silvia at film’s end. Second, the low-angle shot of Silvia, whose white blouse and impeccable grooming contrast with the younger woman’s soiled apron and disheveled appearance, draws attention to her social and psychological power over Mercedes. Silvia is clearly the one in charge in this scene, as she turns her head to an unseen figure and announces that she would like “the one on the right,” essentially purchasing Mercedes as other customers might purchase slabs of meat. The framing of Silvia is another key component of this sequence, as it sets a precedent for the angular framing throughout the film that positions the protagonists as seen through windows, behind bars and gates, and inside doorways, thereby contributing to an overall sensation of being trapped.

In addition to the film’s opening sequence, the physical space in which most of the action occurs, Silvia’s historic home, is especially important to the story’s development (Fig. 3). Rodríguez Risco diligently searched for a house that his crew could transform into a sort of prison for its inhabitants. They settled upon an enclosed complex of several adjacent manor houses to serve as the set and, despite the dilapidated condition of the primary house, the crew managed to create a convincing two-story mansion that, along with its patio and exterior rooms, appears to imprison its owner and her victims (Romero Carrillo par. 8). As it appears on screen, the sprawling structure in which Silvia lives reinforces her solitary experience and isolation from society. Its gloomy interior, barred windows, and small doorways, in conjunction with the close and angular framing of most of the shots inside the house, contribute to the sense that Silvia is confined to a prison of her own making and that, like Mercedes and Jaime, we as spectators have become trapped in her world.

Visually, one of the most striking aspects of Silvia’s character is that she is often wearing white. Whereas her whitewashed manor house recalls the wealth and gentility of a bygone era, her snow-colored dresses conjure up associations with Victorian ideals of femininity like purity and passivity, as well as nineteenth-century portrayals of madness. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in their analysis of unhinged literary heroines, “It is surely significant that doomed, magical, half-mad, or despairing women […] all wear white” (617), and it is highly unlikely that the colour scheme of Silvia’s wardrobe in several major scenes, including the first and final times we see her, is coincidental. In Silvia’s

Fig. 3: Mercedes arrives at Silvia’s estate on the outskirts of town, unaware that it will soon become her prison.
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initial appearance on screen, she is dressed in a white blouse, a spotless garment that bears no resemblance to the bloodied aprons of the young women working in the slaughterhouse (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). In another pivotal sequence, Mercedes, unbeknownst to Silvia, catches a glimpse of her employer wrapped in a flowing white robe and gown as she hums to herself and rocks an empty cradle. An early shot in the sequence, masterfully framed by the keyhole of the protagonist’s bedroom, features a full-frontal view of Silvia in chiaroscuro before cutting to a close-up of her face (Fig. 4). Subsequent shots pan down then back up Silvia’s body, emphasizing the contrast between the whiteness of her robe and the darkness of the room.

The most significant images of Silvia in white come in the film’s final ten minutes when she sports a white dress whose sheer sleeves, lace collar, and ruffled front emphasize her femininity as well as her descent into madness. Each shot of Silvia draws attention to the whiteness of her dress while keeping her face in partial or full shadow throughout a sequence that begins with her playing piano and quickly devolves into her deranged pursuit of Mercedes with a butcher knife. After finally managing to detain her victim, Silvia plunges the knife into Mercedes’s shoulder, which soils her dress. The whiteness of Silvia’s garment defiled by the splotch of Mercedes’s blood will become further stained by that of the baby during the delivery. Low-angle shots capture Silvia holding the newborn, both of them swathed in white cloth stained by the mother’s blood. The camera angle emphasizes Silvia’s momentary power over Mercedes, but her victory is short-lived. In a final burst of strength, Mercedes stabs Silvia symbolically in the abdomen, and as the camera zooms out to an aerial shot, we see the blood darkening her once-pristine dress (Fig. 5). In a juxtaposition of her first appearance on screen, in which her white outfit clashed with Mercedes’s bloody apron, the final image of Silvia is a lingering full shot, immediately followed by a straight cut to a close up, of her wearing the bloodstained white dress from the birth scene (Fig. 6).

The significance of Silvia’s beauty and poise throughout the film should not be discounted. Elegant clothing, flawless makeup, and a flattering hairstyle enhance her natural beauty, and her assured demeanor reflects and reinforces the place of privilege she enjoys in her small community. Nonetheless,
philosopher Kelly Oliver warns in her discussion of the popular subgenre she dubs pregnant horror, “a beautiful woman or adorable child can be more terrifying, particularly in a pedestrian way, than a hideous monster because they are seemingly innocent and attractive; and they are more dangerous because they can pass themselves off as good when they are really evil” (125-126). Indeed, in El vientre, the widow’s beauty goes hand in hand with her monstrosity: as alluring as she may be, her body will come to be seen as horrifying because of its inability to produce offspring and its proclivity to engage in violent behaviour.

From the film’s beginning in the local slaughterhouse to its final scene in a lavish garden, Silvia is visually portrayed as monstrous in several ways. First, she is repeatedly depicted in connection with the abject, specifically with blood, with death, and with the female body. She is associated with the animalistic from the opening sequence in which she is shot watching young women lacerate pig carcasses.

Fig. 5: One life ends as another begins in this aerial shot of the bloody aftermath of Mercedes’s delivery.

Fig. 6: An apparition of Silvia briefly haunts Mercedes’s idyllic ending in a sunny garden.
As the film progresses, she both figuratively and literally becomes the one with blood on her hands. On screen, we do not see the carnage that results from the murders of Silvia’s victims, although we are aware that she uses her own physical strength to kill the men who stand in her way: her husband, Jaime, and Jaime’s uncle Miguel (Gianfranco Brero). The audacity she displays, as well as the confidence she gains, in murdering these men makes Silvia even more monstrous and, in turn, asserts her resolve to abduct Mercedes’s baby. Eventually, we do witness Silvia shed blood when she attempts to prevent her captive’s escape in the movie’s final ten minutes. We also watch her take charge of Mercedes’s delivery and cut the newborn’s umbilical cord, which recalls the image of the bloody fetus from her photo album. While Mercedes—who has just given birth, been stabbed, and stabbed her rival in return—remains nearly spotless, Silvia is the one with stained clothes who spends her final moments of life covered with the blood from the baby boy, from Mercedes, and from her own body (Fig. 5).

Second, the camerawork contributes to the visual construction of Silvia as monstrous by amplifying the control she has over her young victim, Mercedes. The tight, angular framing at first exposes Silvia’s self-imposed confinement: early on, she appears enclosed in the small opening in her front door, behind window panes, and standing in doorways. Soon, however, the cinematography encourages the viewer to relate to Mercedes, rather than her employer, by reinforcing the feeling that she is being held against her will. Given that Mercedes plays the role of the film’s final girl, as spectators, we are supposed to identify with her cinematically as well as narratively (Glover xi). It should come as little surprise, then, that we start to feel claustrophobic after numerous shots of our heroine behind the bars of windows, gates, and even a crib (Fig. 7). Silvia does not allow Mercedes to leave the house and, after the young woman’s escape and thwarted appeal for protection from the police, Silvia resorts to locking her victim in the bedroom off the patio that separates her from the main house. In an especially effective scene, the shadows from window bars fall upon Mercedes’s pregnant body after Silvia grants her permission to take a short “walk” on the patio. An eye-level medium shot then captures the misery of the young prisoner, centered in the foreground against the backdrop of a wall covered with grated windows, as she shuffles around the enclosed space under her captor’s watchful eye.

Fig. 7: Throughout the film, the shots of Mercedes behind windows, between railings, and inside door frames remind viewers that she is a prisoner in Silvia's home.
Third, the frequent use of chiaroscuro to accentuate the contrast between light and shadow not only intensifies the film’s dramatic tension, but also casts doubt upon Silvia’s character. Throughout the film, the bathing of Silvia’s face in shadow suggests there is a sinister side to her personality, that she is hiding something, that she is not to be trusted. In fact, in many of the close-ups of Silvia, either the right or left side of her face is fully covered in shadow while the other half is illuminated, a technique that is rarely used for Mercedes (Fig. 8). On the contrary, Mercedes’s face is usually evenly lit, often in frontal shots, which attributes a sort of honesty and openness to the young woman. With respect to interior shots of Silvia’s home, the skillful use of chiaroscuro at several key points—such as when she sings a lullaby to herself in the unused nursery or when she congratulates Mercedes and Jaime on their pregnancy in the formal sitting room—enhances not only the aesthetic quality of the mise-en-scènes but also the solemn and solitary environment in which the widow resides. Thanks in large part to chiaroscuro lighting, one scene in particular is as visually stunning as it is horrifying: the sequence, referenced above, in which Mercedes enters the sitting room where Silvia is playing the piano and attempts to attack her from behind, not knowing that her captor is armed with a knife. The contrast between light and dark intensifies the ideological impact of the conflict that ensues between the good and evil mother figures. By drawing attention to Silvia’s flowing white dress and her half-lit face as she drops the knife she wields over Mercedes, as she claims that she “isn’t going to hurt my [her own] baby,” the lighting scheme also underscores the madness into which Silvia has slipped.

**Monstrous Ambiguity**

Above all else, Silvia’s monstrosity lies in her ambiguity. She epitomizes Kristeva’s notion of the abject: “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Powers 4). Her in-betweenness is precisely what horrifies the audience, and her monstrous femininity is solidified in a pivotal scene in the final third of the film. In this scene, which takes place in the kitchen, Silvia reveals her past pregnancies to Mercedes by showing her an
album full of rejected adoption applications, pictures of her pregnancies and of aborted fetuses, and newspaper clippings about her husband’s death (Fig. 9). While it is unclear whether Silvia’s husband, a renowned gynecologist who did not want his wife to have children, somehow caused the miscarriages, it is clear that he sterilized his wife. Silvia points out a photo claiming, “That was the last time,” but she refuses to verbalize what her husband then did to her; instead, she mimics a snipping motion with her fingers. As the camera returns to the album, an extreme close-up insert shot of a newspaper headline announces her husband’s death: “a staircase was his final journey.”10 The headline, in combination with her chuckle that he was always “so clumsy,” leads viewers to suspect that Silvia in fact killed her husband, at which point they realize the extent of her instability and truly begin to fear for Mercedes’s safety.

If we accept Creed’s argument that horror films construct the monstrous through forms of abjection such as murder (Silvia’s killing of her husband, Jaime, and his uncle), the corpse (her victims, those of her unborn children), and the female body (Silvia’s sterile body beside Mercedes’s fertile one), then the aforementioned kitchen scene is crucial to solidifying Silvia’s monstrosity, which cannot be separated from her ambiguity (9). In particular, three aspects of her in-betweenness contribute to the construction of her monstrosity in this scene and throughout the film: first, she is simultaneously associated with lack and with excess; second, she is neither mother nor not a mother; and third, she is neither fully female nor fully male.

The first aspect of Silvia’s ambiguity is that she is simultaneously associated with lack and with excess. She is neither reproductive (physical lack) nor restrained (emotional excess). Her body, having been rendered incapable of procreating, exemplifies lack. She is physically unable to fulfill society’s expectations for a woman of her status, not to mention her own aspirations, and she is left alone without a child to rear and without anyone to care for her in return. Despite this physical deficiency, Silvia is also equated with excess, specifically the excess of her maternal desire. In the eyes of her husband, her reproductive potential—albeit unfulfilled—was out of control, and her yearning to have a child repulsed him to such an extent that he chose to suppress it. Whether Silvia’s unrestrained maternal desire lead to or resulted
from her unbalanced psyche is a question that the film leaves unresolved, although it does establish the link between her hunger to have a child and her immoral behaviour. The combination of physical lack and emotional excess is, therefore, one component of Silvia’s role as an ambiguous maternal figure.

A second element of Silvia’s in-betweeness is that she is neither a mother nor a non-mother. She is not a mother in the traditional sense of the word, given that she has not parented biological or adopted offspring. Silvia’s situation forces the viewer to grapple with the very definition of mother: she is a woman who became pregnant several times with the explicit desire of raising children. Although those pregnancies resulted in miscarriages, does that negate her identity as a mother? Moreover, Silvia considers Mercedes to be a surrogate whose baby she will raise as her own. As disturbed as the situation may be, it is evident that Silvia sees herself as a mother-to-be who, after repeatedly having been denied a baby of her own, soon will have the opportunity to parent a child. Analogous to the paradox of the maternal body that is neither one nor two beings, Silvia’s nebulous maternal identity, neither one nor the other, challenges viewers’ understanding of motherhood and problematizes their identification with and sympathy for her. Like Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Silvia’s incomplete maternity does not respect boundaries and cannot be categorized; she inhabits a liminal space in which she is neither mother nor not mother and, although she may not be missing limbs or organs like the ghosts and zombies typical of the horror genre, her incompleteness nonetheless makes her monstrous to the audience.11 In a film replete with detail shots of her eyes and hands, the maximum cinematographic expression of Silvia’s monstrous incompleteness and in-betweeness can be found in the scene in which she watches Mercedes and Jaime make love in her bedroom, when an extreme close-up features her right eye framed between the blinds of a closet door (Fig. 10).

A third component of Silvia’s monstrosity lies in the fact that, as a result of her infertility, she is neither fully female nor fully male in the eyes of society. Without offspring of her own, she has not fulfilled the traditional biological role for a married woman. In seeking a surrogate to bear her child, her relationship to childbearing paradoxically begins to resemble that of a man who must depend on a woman to carry his offspring. Shirley Shalev and Dafna Lemish argue that

Fig. 10: Silvia spies on the young couple’s sexual encounter from behind a closet door.
contemporary surrogacy provides an infertile woman with a similar option to men, enabling her to accompany the pregnant surrogate mother who carries her child-to-be without physically involving her own body in the carrying process. Thus, her positioning in the reproductive process becomes more equal to that of a man, as she turns from being a means of reproduction into a beneficiary of female reproduction when she achieves parenthood like men do, while their bodies remain unaffected. (333)

In *El vientre*, Silvia’s barrenness allows her to approach a privilege traditionally reserved for men in that, if she can raise Mercedes’s baby as her own, she can transcend the dichotomy that has confined women to either reproductive beings or sexual beings. Shalev and Lemish identify this new sort of female social hybrid as an infertile mother, one who straddles the categories of reproduction and sexuality and “remains whole, just like a man” (333). Moreover, Silvia jeopardizes conventional notions of masculinity and femininity because she destroys each man who poses a threat to fulfilling her maternal desire. She engineers her husband’s death after he sterilizes her; she kills Jaime before he can escape with Mercedes to Lima; and she stabs Jaime’s uncle after he warns that he will denounce her to the police. Her potential to be a parent via surrogacy and her propensity for violence are two ways in which Silvia blurs the lines between male and female, thereby challenging established gender roles and endangering a society that rigidly adheres to them.

For Creed, the primary ideological project of the horror film is to purify the abject, which, in the context of *El vientre*, is Silvia’s embodied female monstrosity (53). As a maternal figure that is both in-between and incomplete, her abjection threatens life—not just the life of Mercedes but, in broader terms, the life and health of a society that expects her to conform to certain expectations and behaviours—and therefore must be eliminated (Creed 1). The film suggests that Silvia’s childlessness is an external sign of an internal depravity that may initially intrigue but ultimately repulse the viewer. The viewer in turn cheers for and identifies with Mercedes, the only character capable of successfully confronting Silvia’s abjection or, in Creed’s words, with the ability “to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between human and non-human” (53). Building on the work of Kristeva and Creed, Oliver explains that pregnant horror films go beyond other genres in displaying anxiety over female reproduction. In this subgenre in particular, women’s reproductive power “is figured as excessive, violent, and threatening in terms of the evil that may be harbored in women’s wombs (and in their imaginations)” (149). Again, in *El vientre* this applies exclusively to Silvia, to the woman who is perceived as incomplete and in-between in her relationship to motherhood. It does not pertain to Mercedes, who easily carried her first baby to term, had the strength to deliver it amidst the most horrific of circumstances, and protected it from the evil intentions of her aggressor, Silvia.

**Conclusion**

In her analysis of Hollywood films that feature morally ambiguous mother characters, Kelly Oliver contends that these women are often portrayed as possessing an excessive desire to reproduce and a
propensity for evil that result from weakness, passivity, and mental instability, “if not outright insanity” (14). Oliver also points to the nineteenth-century belief that excessive emotion in pregnant women was considered to lead to insanity which, in turn, led to unhealthy or deformed babies (113). With this in mind, even after multiple viewings, I am left with a number of unanswered questions about El vientre, and about Silvia in particular: Did Silvia’s unsuccessful pregnancies cause her madness or did excessive emotion cause her to miscarry repeatedly? Did her unrestrained maternal desire lead to nefarious behaviour or did an inherent immorality manifest itself physically in her monstrous womb? And when, exactly, do we, as spectators, deem Silvia completely and irrevocably monstrous? Is it when we discover her body’s failure to reproduce, or when we understand that she wants to keep Mercedes’s child, or when she kills Jaime (and his uncle and, in all likelihood, her own husband)? That is, do we demonize Silvia after she performs horrifying acts, or do we expect her to commit atrocities because we have already demonized her infertility and supposed incompleteness?

El vientre’s Silvia challenges Western notions of motherhood that designate which women are (not) allowed to be considered mothers and forces the audience to grapple with the lengths to which a “respectable” woman might go to raise a child of her own. Yet El vientre also suggests that Silvia’s excess of maternal desire is the source of her mental instability and immoral behaviour, and a critical reading of the film exposes a link between her infertility and her in-betweenness, the true sources of her monstrous femininity. As an incomplete, ambiguous maternal figure, Silvia poses a threat to the patriarchal society she inhabits and therefore must be stopped. Moreover, as a threat to life and to order, Silvia cannot exist once Mercedes becomes a mother herself; the young, fertile—and as the film implies, “real”—woman must reject the monstrous-feminine and eliminate Silvia. The film allows the spectator to confront the abject, to confront Silvia’s monstrosity, while restoring the symbolic order by movie’s end. Like Mercedes, spectators can engage with the abject but ultimately be comforted when the goodness of the ideal mother figure triumphs over the unbearable monstrous-feminine.

Notes
1. “Lo que ella quiere está dentro de ti.” Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are mine.
3. “El guión, elaborado por el director y su hermano Gonzalo Rodríguez, muestra desde la primera secuencia un personaje calculador, sutilmente glacial, que busca, escoge, sustrae de un espacio preexistente -un camal, en precoz metáfora de su propósito- y compra prácticamente un cuerpo, un recipiente, una incubadora móvil.” My emphasis. Quoted by Laslo Rojas, par. 6.
4. “Silvia, una hermosa, desquiciada e infértel viuda de cuarenta y cinco años, vive obsesionada con tener un bebé. Desesperada, trama un plan en el que toma el control de una ingenua y, en su mente, fértil huérfana llamada Mercedes.” My emphasis. See the film’s website at www.elvientrelapelicula.com.
5. It is worth noting that Rodríguez Risco has admitted that, in a previous version of the film, Silvia is the one who emerges victorious, not Mercedes. However, after negative reactions from market studies and a focus group that screened the earlier version, the filmmakers changed the ending to the one that made it to theatres (Lecarnaque par. 6).
6. “‘Vientre’ trata sobre el lado oscuro del deseo materno. La historia se originó cuando, a partir de una experiencia personal, descubrí como algo tan lindo como el deseo materno, al volverse obsesivo, podía trastocarse en algo peligroso.” Quoted by Laslo Rojas, par. 6.
7. “La de la derecha.”
8. “Yo no voy a dañar a mi bebé.” Mercedes quickly retorts with “No es tuyo” (“It’s not yours”).

10. The headline reads “Una escalera fue su último camino.”

11. See Nöel Carroll’s theory of horror, in which he “speculate[s] that an object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless” (32).

12. In Peruvian culture, it is still expected that men and women become parents in order to be fully recognized as adults. For more information on gender roles in Peru, including notions of motherhood and fatherhood, see anthropologist Norma J. Fuller’s prolific body of work.

Works Cited


El vientre. Directed by Daniel Rodríguez Risco, performances by Vanessa Saba and Mayella Llocilla, Cinecorp, 2014.
