



Martin-Jones, D. and Montañez, M. S. (2019) What is the ‘silent house’? Interpreting the international appeal of Tokio Films’ Uruguayan horror *La casa muda*/The Silent House (Hernández, 2010). *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas*, 16(1), pp. 25-47. (doi: [10.1386/slac.16.1.25_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/slac.16.1.25_1))

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Deposited on 19 November 2018

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**What is the ‘Silent House’? Interpreting the international appeal of Tokio Films’
Uruguayan horror *La casa muda/The Silent House***

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the micro-budget Uruguayan horror movie, *La casa muda/The Silent House* (Hernández, 2010), as exemplar of the difficulties Uruguayan filmmakers face in production and (international) distribution and the innovative means they develop to negotiate these issues. Like many Uruguayan films, *La casa muda* premiered internationally (at the Cannes Film Festival) and, as outlined in the article, it follows a similar aesthetic and narrative ‘backgrounding’ of the nation (the deliberate erasure of indicators of national identity, such as national monuments) to that of Uruguayan art films. Nevertheless, its production history and journey to international prominence remains rather unique. This distinction reinforces the importance of the festival circuit in facilitating production and distribution of Uruguayan art films, but, also – as is less often discussed – the television industry and especially the internet as counter-balances to the dominance of Hollywood’s outreach in the region. Moreover, the ‘ambiguous’ nature of the film’s narrative and iconographic content illustrates how Uruguayan filmmakers simultaneously meet, and depart from, international audience expectations. Ultimately, *La casa muda* is not of interest specifically for being a Latin American horror film, but because it travelled internationally using the same distribution platforms (the festival circuit, DVD release), and aesthetic

strategies as many preceding Uruguayan (and Latin American) art films, only this time to confound established expectations of films travelling these routes.

Keywords

La casa muda/ Silent House

horror

Uruguayan cinema

YouTube

Cannes Film Festival

transnational

abortion

incest

rural temporality

In 2011, Hollywood released another teen-oriented horror film, *Silent House* (Kentis and Lau, 2011). It is unlikely that many of its viewers realized it was a remake of a Uruguayan horror film, *La casa muda/The Silent House* (Hernández, 2010). Hollywood remaking successful films from other film industries is an established practice, with Asia providing several high-profile examples since the Japanese horror film *Ringu/Ring* (Nakata, 1998) was remade as *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002). Yet, whilst Hollywood's outsourcing of its research and development to other film industries is not novel (Xu 2008), what is unusual is how *La casa muda* came into existence. Although its remake status would suggest that it should be

considered on par with Asian films like *Ringu*, in fact – as this article elaborates – from a tiny budget it had a more fortuitous rise to international prominence.

La casa muda is arguably Uruguay's most internationally successful film. It is an accomplished horror film that induces fear, curiosity, intellectual engagement in a puzzle-solving narrative enigma and unbearable tension. As a pleasurable frightener, its premiere at the Director's Fortnight at Cannes might seem surprising. Although the resurgence of Uruguayan cinema in the 1990s and 2000s has relied on the festival circuit to provide a route to international distribution (like so many small filmmaking nations which embrace the global inequalities for filmmaking that this system combats, exposes and, at times, even fosters [Martin-Jones and Montañez 2013a]), *La casa muda*'s route to international success (whilst similar to that of many Uruguayan art films), was, in fact, a little unusual: this genre film owes its international success to the internet, specifically to YouTube and the blogosphere, as well as to its use of a single continuous take and the manner in which its iconography and narrative themes (which resonate with the historical realities of Uruguay and Latin America more generally – as we might expect from a film from that region) are figured to appeal internationally.

This article addresses the genesis of *La casa muda* and its journey to international prominence. We draw on an interview conducted with the producer and director team Gustavo Rojo and Gustavo Hernández in Montevideo in 2011.¹ Fascinating though their story is, we do not offer it simply to provide the filmmakers' viewpoint as the answer to all of the questions thrown up by the film. Rather the background information that they provide enables us to assess the impact that *La casa muda*'s generic status had on its international success, and to consider how this film's specific 'backgrounding' of the nation relates to a similar 'backgrounding' to be found in much internationally successful Uruguayan art cinema. Furthermore, we explore how the film's ambiguous narrative uses iconography evocative of

subject matter associated, internationally at least, with films about recent Latin American history (noticeably the exploration of lost pasts – seen in photographs – and disappeared people – seen in a haunting ‘ghost’ child – emblematic of films emerging after Cold War dictatorships) to address quite different themes with more universal ‘appeal’: namely incest and abortion. To reach this conclusion, we consider the possible interpretations which such (ultimately) ‘false’ clues lead viewers to consider, creating an interpretive ‘stop-start’ viewing experience, as expectations born of previous films about the recent history of Latin America are evoked, then revoked, before the film resolves into an interpretation more universally applicable.

For this reason, whilst the film is of interest for being a Uruguayan horror film produced by an industry which creates fewer genre films than art films, more specifically it is valuable to consider in relation to the notion that Uruguay has many contemporary ‘cinemas’, due to its ability to travel internationally by erasing the nation (something which many art films from Uruguay also do), and by using more unorthodox means of raising awareness of its existence, such as the internet.

La casa muda

La casa muda centres on a young woman called Laura (Florencia Colucci). She arrives at a boarded-up country house on foot with her father Wilson (Gustavo Alonso). Her father’s friend Néstor (Abel Tripaldi) then arrives in his car, and all enter together using hand held lamps. They have come to clean and renovate the house, which is for the moment without power and in darkness. Néstor departs, and as they await his return, Wilson falls asleep. Laura, however, is kept awake by sudden banging on a boarded-up window and sounds of movement upstairs. Although not convinced that he can hear anything, Wilson

reluctantly agrees to investigate. As he ventures upstairs we remain with Laura downstairs, who hears her father fall, and his body being dragged across the floor. Thereafter the camera stays with Laura as she attempts to elude whoever has bound and mutilated Wilson, depositing him back in the downstairs lounge, and then moving him again when the perpetually-sobbing Laura seeks an escape route.

Although we follow Laura, who is seemingly evading the apparent stalker-psychopath, we gradually realize that Laura may suffer from a personality disorder. Her schizophrenia is first revealed stylistically in a rare moment when she escapes the house into the surrounding woods. Standing alone to the right of the frame, the camera pans left to scan the trees as though from her point of view, only for Laura to appear in shot entering from the left-hand side of the frame. The camera then pans right as Laura hears a noise to her right and half turns, only for her to again appear from the right-hand side of the frame. This process is repeated once again, so that Laura enters from the left. In terms of filming, this will presumably have required Colucci to run behind camera-operator Pedro Luque, and to reappear, sobbing hysterically, in shot from another direction, three times. In the diegetic world this would only make sense if she were either walking in a rather unusual pattern of half circles, or if she were, so to speak, 'two' Lauras.

This initial moment of stylistically produced disorientation is the first clue to Laura's dual personality, as her movements seem to show her reacting to the sound of 'herself' acting in another space to that which she (convinces herself she) occupies. This is just as she has done previously when attacking her father upstairs whilst all the time believing she was downstairs hearing the attack. Noticeably it is after this deliberately revealing blocking and camera work that Laura turns to find a ghostly little girl in white (María Paz Salazar), fully revealed standing behind her for the first time.

This ghostly child will continue to disturb Laura, and later will prove the key to her schizophrenic behaviour. In an upstairs room the girl first appears to haunt Laura menacingly, illuminated in a blackout only by the flashes of a Polaroid instamatic camera. The other upstairs rooms gradually reveal the child's significance. As Laura travels the length of the upstairs floor she passes through a room containing a pram, stuffed with pictures (in sepia, black and white and colour) of herself pregnant. Néstor is prominent in several. Then, in the final bedroom (Néstor's, it transpires), Laura encounters a staged museum to her sexual past in the house. A bed is placed in situ, surrounded by plastic sheets at once suggestive of a crime scene, a hospital or a butcher's cold store. The walls are covered with Polaroids, which, although they appear to be a revelation to Laura, she presumably placed there herself, in her other guise as a stalking, vengeful terror. We glean from the Polaroids that Wilson and Néstor had sexual encounters in this space with Laura and several other young women, who may have been prostitutes. On the bed Laura finds a rosary (which we have previously seen in Néstor's car), which she grips whilst examining the more provocative pictures of herself with Néstor and her father. After Néstor returns, the film ends with Laura murdering both Wilson and Néstor with a sickle.

In terms of a backstory to Laura's motivation, it is suggested that Laura may have been sexually involved with her father and became pregnant, seemingly with Néstor's child. Although we cannot be certain, Néstor may also be a relative of Laura's. We are left to infer that either Laura had an abortion, perhaps against her will or better judgement; her daughter died or was murdered by one of the men; or she gave up her child or was forced to do so. At any rate, Laura's memory of her previous time spent in this house is a blank for her 'everyday' personality, whilst her 'dark side' has become monstrous in its desire for revenge. This latter, avenging persona leaves the clues needed for her quotidian self to recover the memory of her traumatic past in the house. The film concludes with a coda, which finds

Laura in the woods, talking happily with her daughter, Sofi, who is revealed to be the phantom girl. With this synopsis in mind, we turn to the film's production history, and what it reveals about the routes via which Uruguayan films can reach an international audience.

Tokio Films: From YouTube to Cannes

La casa muda was shot over a period of five days in 2009 on a budget of US\$8,000, money put up personally by producer Rojo. It was shot on a borrowed Canon EOS 5D Mark II, a digital photographic camera. The 5D is small and light, giving flexibility to the filmmakers when shooting in the confined spaces of the house, and – as William Brown (2013) notes of both this film and digital cinema more broadly – of transitioning from point of view to more 'objective' shots with great fluidity. For instance, when Néstor's body is dragged along the floor by Laura (and it is not clear whether it is the body of actor Tripaldi, or that of camera-operator Luque), we see her from Néstor's point of view – as if he is holding or is the camera itself (Brown 2013, 66).

La casa muda was Hernández's debut feature after graduating from the *Escuela de Cine* in Montevideo in 2002. After a period making music videos and advertisements, in 2004 he co-founded *Contenidos TV*, a company that predominantly makes programmes commercially for Channel 12. He then created Tokio Films, which made *La casa muda*, together with colleague and fellow horror fan Rojo (also a graduate of Montevideo's *Escuela de Cine*). The film's limited budget greatly influenced the film's production and form, for example determining the number of days available for shooting, the idea of using a single continuous take and the aim of producing a claustrophobic thriller in a confined, tightly controlled space.

It took two months to make the film. The small cast and crew, including cinematographer Luque who has worked on several prominent contemporary Uruguayan films, worked as a close-knit team without pay. There were several dry runs, false starts and frayed tempers as from a twenty-page script they established the blocking, camera positions and lighting (in particular the precise distance from Colucci's face of the hand held light).

Rojo and Hernández argue that freedom from state funding also freed them from having to engage with recognisably 'Uruguayan' issues. They considered that their chances of obtaining further funding through the channels that many Uruguayan filmmakers use were limited, since such funding rarely goes to genre films. Furthermore, applying for state funding could take several years. Accordingly, their favoured metaphor for the swiftness of the production process was the instantaneous production of Polaroid photos from an instamatic camera – like the one integral to the film's narrative.

One week after shooting was complete, a one-minute teaser was uploaded to YouTube. This was soon spread through the blogosphere by horror fans and offers came in shortly afterwards from North American studios, such as Sony, Warner and Paramount, who wanted the remake rights on the proviso that the film would not be screened (Esmoris 2012). Rojo and Hernández were also contacted by programmers for the Cannes Film Festival, who wished to see the entire film. They fashioned and sent a rough cut, without finished sound track, which was shortlisted for screening from over 3,000 entries. They decided to screen at Cannes, rather than accept the Hollywood offers..

After Cannes, the film travelled to over 30 festivals across Europe, the Americas and Australia. After various technical improvements – retouching of the colour, the addition of Dolby Sound, etc. – an international sales agreement was reached with Paris-based sales and acquisitions firm Elle Driver. Distribution deals were secured for over 40 countries, primarily

on DVD and often with only a few additional screenings for film critics. The film was popular in Uruguay and across Latin America, becoming the most widely distributed Uruguayan film. As noted, a US remake deal was secured, with *Silent House* produced by Tazora Films (again involving Elle Driver), directed by Chris Kentis and Laura Lau (Kentis previously directed *Open Water* [2003]), and featuring teen star Elizabeth Olsen.

This production history shows that *La casa muda* shares many similarities with contemporary Uruguayan films, especially in its ability to appeal internationally both within and without the festival circuit (having reached out internationally on DVD release, as have many of Control Z's films, for instance), whilst its single take aesthetic and its narrative strategies – which background things national – make it formally similar to its Uruguayan art cinema peers (Martin-Jones and Montañez 2007, 2009, 2013a). Yet there is a difference. *La casa muda* did not receive state funding or take advantage of international coproduction financing, nor did it travel *directly* to the film festivals in the manner of, say, the award winning films of Control Z (*25 Watts* [Rebella and Stoll, 2001], *Whisky* [Rebella and Stoll, 2004], *Gigante/Giant* [Biniez, 2009] and so on.).

Instead of these more traditional avenues (or rather, in addition to these), it was the internet that enabled this genre film to achieve such a high profile – much like the action movie *Ataque de Pánico!/Panic Attack!* (Alvarez, 2009), which William Brown considers in the next essay in this issue. This short film about an attack on Montevideo by giant robots, reminiscent of US disaster films like *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996) and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), was made for a few hundred dollars by Fede Alvarez. Once posted on YouTube, its popularity led to Alvarez's move to Hollywood to direct the 2013 remake of Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981). A similar buzz surrounded *La casa muda* after the dissemination of its teaser on YouTube, and it was then able to follow a more familiar route for contemporary Uruguayan art films, namely premiering at a major festival. However, as

the offers from the Hollywood majors suggest, had *La casa muda* not been selected to screen at Cannes, its YouTube appearance could conceivably have been a passport to financial gain from a Hollywood remake anyway.

La casa muda's status as a genre film, then, contributed to its ability to reach out internationally via the internet. Scholarly debates surrounding popular genres indicate that whilst some films may be, as Jean-Pierre Jeancolas (1992, 141) argues, 'inexportable' – for example, language or cultural associations may prove barriers to enjoyment in other countries, inadvertently enclosing a genre film's circulation to within its nation of production – there have been many instances of genre films performing very well across myriad borders, such as the European spaghetti western (Eleftheriotis 2001). The international market for horror films is, of course, well known. But is horror's international appeal the only reason for the success of *La casa muda*?

Rojo and Hernández stress in interview that they consider *La casa muda* to be a genre breakthrough for Uruguayan, if not for Latin American, cinema. Certainly it is the first Uruguayan horror film to gain such international recognition, and in general terms it joins contemporaries like the cannibal film *Somos lo que hay/We Are What We Are* (Grau, 2010) from Mexico, the Cuban zombie film *Juan de los Muertos/Juan of the Dead* (Brugués, 2011) (to name only two well-known examples), along with the international prominence of Guillermo del Toro, in indicating the recent resurgence of the horror genre in Latin America. Although Latin American genre production is not well-known beyond the continent in the same way as, say, J-Horror from Japan, there is a history of Latin American horror, dating back to Mexican horror movies of the early 1930s, through the Brazilian 'Coffin Joe' movies of the 1960s, to the present. This heritage has proven sufficient to warrant a recent monograph on the topic by Gustavo Subero (2016).

La casa muda is not the first genre film made in Uruguay. The twenty-first century has already seen the superhero movie *El Noctámbulo/The Night Owl* (Díaz, 2006) and the vampire flick *La Balada de Vlad Tepes/The Ballad of Vlad Tepes* (Vila, 2009), albeit neither achieved the international prominence (or the production values) of *La casa muda*. Certain other popular genre films with coproduction funding from countries like Spain, Argentina or Brazil have had more success (and in some cases international exposure), such as the comedy *Ruido/Noise* (Bertalmío, 2005), the melodrama *En la puta vida/In This Tricky Life* (Flores Silva, 2001), the musical *Miss Tacuarembó* (Sastre, 2010), the crime thriller *Reus* (Fernández and Pi, 2010) and the costume drama *La Redota – Una Historia de Artigas/The Story of Artigas* (Charlone, 2011). Given its generic status, then, *La casa muda*'s success abroad is anomalous for a Uruguayan horror film. In this we can largely agree with Rojo and Hernández above-stated contention (that *La casa muda* is a genre-breakthrough, at least internationally, for Uruguayan cinema), even if it is not unique as a Latin American horror film. Thus this is another reason why we argue that *La casa muda* is not rare by virtue of being a Uruguayan or Latin American horror film, but because it was a successful Uruguayan horror film that – after the initial boost it gained from the internet – travelled on the same pathways as many art films, using somewhat similar aesthetic techniques, which we turn to examine next.

La casa muda frames its subject matter similarly to many contemporary Uruguayan art films that background or 'auto-erase' the nation. As we have discussed elsewhere (Martin-Jones and Montañez 2013a), the primary reason for this is the economic difficulty of recuperating production costs from the domestic box office (even in a context where the average budget is thousands rather than millions of dollars), of a country of under three and a half million people where ease of internet piracy and limited disposable income discourages a DVD buying culture. Thus, in order to gain international recognition and distribution, many

Uruguayan films, such as those produced by Control Z Films, target the international film festival circuit with stories that deliberately erase their Uruguayan identity within the text. This includes the use of non-specific ‘anywhere’ locations (often using anonymous interiors), tight framing of settings in terms of cinematography (avoiding more ‘classical’ norms of establishing location through the display of prominent national landmarks, for example) and stories about the everyday lives of people in the urban hinterlands of contemporary globalization (with particular location unspecified so as to retain universal appeal). In this practice, Uruguayan art films are not dissimilar to many films from around the world which are screened on the festival circuit.

La casa muda for its part is similarly cagey about revealing its national identity in the text. Rojo and Henández argue that the story has a universal relevance and can appeal to people in many countries. After all, *La casa muda* is set in an isolated rural house and most of the action takes place inside. The film also avoids making any direct allegorical comment on national identity. Consequently, and as with the other Uruguayan art films destined for the festival circuit, there is nothing to get in the way of immersion for the spectator who knows nothing about Uruguay (e.g. no prominent statue of a national founding figure or landmark likely unrecognisable to many beyond the nation is used to establish a location). Ultimately it is only the accent that might identify *La casa muda*’s national status (but non-Spanish speakers typically cannot distinguish the Uruguayan from other Spanish accents) and the film’s setting does not discourage the assumption that it might be a Spanish film. Indeed, such a mistake would even be understandable, considering that the use of a camera flash intermittently to illuminate an otherwise pitch-black house and a wall of photographs that reveals a hidden past are both features of the Spanish horror *Los ojos de Julia/Julia’s Eyes* (Morales, 2010).

As we shall now explore, leaving behind the production history, *La casa muda* deploys an iconography associated with recent Latin American history (photographs, ‘ghost’ child), as seen in various films since the end of the Cold War and the rolling back of the US-backed dictatorships, to explore the contentious issues of incest and abortion. Where the film stands on these issues, though, is initially difficult to establish due to the ambiguity created by this familiar imagery appearing in what transpires as, ultimately, a film with a more ‘universal’ subject reflected in the broad international appeal of the film evident in its production history.

What is the ‘Silent House’? No ‘single take’ on transnational issues

Most of the international coverage of *La casa muda* does not dwell extensively on its Uruguayan origin. The principal talking point is typically its standout aesthetic feature, the use of a digital camera to – apparently – film the narrative in a single take. Typically, a comparison is made to films like Alexander Sokurov’s *Russkiy kovcheg/Russian Ark* (Sokurov, 2002), although other digital films have used this technique (to greater or lesser extent) before and since *La casa muda*: ranging from the Colombian *PVC-1* (Stathoulopoulos, 2007) to the United States’ *Birdman* (Iñárritu, 2014) and Germany’s *Victoria* (Schipper, 2015), etc. This paratextual focus is invited by *La casa muda*’s tag line, ‘*Miedo Real en Tiempo Real*’/‘Real Fear in Real Time’, which is translated by the US remake as ‘Experience Real Fear in Real Time’. Whether viewers believe the film was shot in a single take, or whether edited in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), the effect is the same: the discussion of this topic accentuates its unique selling point as the first horror film to attempt such a feat. The two-page spread given to a review of the DVD release by *Empire* is exemplary. A computer generated ‘map’ of the location attempts to show how

Laura's movements through the house and surroundings, tracked by cameraman Luque, could physically have been achieved in one take. However, as with Hitchcock's film, the 'was it a single take or not?' question is something of a McGuffin in terms of our understanding of the film, which offers audiences a chance to engage with other transnationally important issues.

La casa muda opens with the legend 'Una historia inspirada en hechos reales'/'A story inspired by real events'. This is, of course, a common way to open a fiction film, and in this instance refers to several unsolved murders in the Uruguayan countryside in 1944. Yet when questioned about the significance of the film in any nationally allegorical, historical or political sense, Rojo and Hernández downplay any such suggestion, whether from events past or present. Whilst acknowledging that the idea for the film gained some inspiration from contemporary events in Uruguay and across Latin America – including house break-ins, kidnappings and the growth of security culture – their situating of the film within the historical period of its production is ultimately at least as much the result of decision making when low budget filmmaking with a primary focus on the possibilities offered by HD technology to create an experience in real time (e.g. using contemporary locations and mise-en-scene keeps costs down). They instead discuss the film in the manner one expects of industry professionals looking to engage a broad audience, stressing its universal themes: the focus on Laura's psychological state, its exploration of the relationships between humans (especially family members), difficulties of communication between generation and the film's ability to raise problematic ethical issues of universal relevance, especially incest.

Nevertheless, whilst the 'Based on a True Story' approach can be understood as a way of marketing the film based on its generic expectations (after all, the costumes and Néstor's car set the film in the present day, as opposed to the 1944 of the actual true story), through its iconography *La casa muda* tantalizes with the suggestion that there may be recognisable national-allegorical interpretations to be found, regarding the possible meaning of the 'silent

house.’ Accordingly, we will follow this dangling carrot, tracking the labyrinthine interpretative dead ends it takes us to, as *La casa muda* tempts viewers familiar with recent Latin American cinema to view it as nation-specific, before revealing its more transnational dimension.

Literally speaking, the actual ‘identity’ of the Uruguayan house in which the film was shot is interwoven into the drama. The film’s very final shot, of Laura disappearing into the sunset, concludes with a brief dedication to the Uruguayan painter Alfredo Zorrilla. Zorrilla is the owner of the house in which the film was shot (Chiarelli 2011), and his paintings are distinctive because they often contain characters without facial features. During the film, in one of the upstairs bedrooms, Laura uncovers several painted canvases which are either originals, copies or at least evoke Zorrilla’s distinctive style; their faceless bodies add to the unease generated by the film’s cinematography, lighting, sound and *mise-en-scène*. Even if Zorrilla’s paintings remain peripheral to the national canon of Uruguayan art history we could argue that their depiction of Uruguay in the early decades of the twentieth century are used to suggest some kind of historical resonance between the events of the 1940s upon which the film’s story is based and the narrative in the 1990s. In this way the meaning of the silent house could be related to the national past. We might be tempted by the presence of the paintings to consider what violent undercurrents from the 1940s – during the historical period when an economically prosperous Uruguay was considered the ‘*Suiza de América*’/the Switzerland of America – remain ‘boarded up’ within the nation, and are now recurring post-dictatorship. What ‘faceless’ histories await their uncovering, we might be tempted to consider?

Thus, we could interpret the silent house as a representative space in which issues of national concern are addressed, as per the metaphor of the house standing in for a nation in microcosm. Most famously, Isabel Allende’s novel, *La casa de los espíritus/The House of the*

Spirits (1982), uses a family house as the setting for an allegory of Chile's turbulent history. Accordingly, a range of possible national-allegorical interpretations for *La casa muda* could follow, most obviously that incest and abortion remain unspoken taboos in Uruguay, as difficult to confront now as they were in the 1940s. There is perhaps an element of truth to this approach, but even if so, it is more the case that a theme of national significance to Uruguay is being packaged to render it transnationally accessible – as we shall discuss below.

Perhaps even more obvious, in terms of national-allegorical red herrings, is the evocation of the silent house as the national past under dictatorship. The haunting presence of Sofi and the retelling of her lost story through Polaroids is reminiscent of filmic depictions of the recent history of *los desaparecidos* (the 'disappeareds', political prisoners of the US-backed Cold War dictatorships in Latin America who were imprisoned, tortured and executed without trial); the ongoing hunt for their children, who were illegally adopted; and attempts to reconnect to a lost past without the aid of a generation of disappeared parents, which Mirianne Hirsch (1997) dubs 'post-memory'. Because Sofi's haunting presence is not made apparent until the end, there exists up until this point the possibility that the child may not be dead, but rather missing or disappeared. This unsettling ambiguity is precisely that which marks the search for the children of the *desaparecidos*. Is it their plight which is evoked by the faceless paintings?

Key to such a view of the house is the child's recurring appearance in Polaroid photos and mirrors. The role of photographs in recovering lost memories is established very early, when Laura picks up an old photograph album, only to find what appear to be three recently added Polaroids from an instamatic camera. They would appear to be photos of her father sitting asleep in front of her, albeit one of them seems, incongruously, to have a doll in it. In the diegetic world these are photos that can only have been taken a moment earlier, presumably by her 'other' (schizophrenic) self. Thus, the first sense we have of the silent

house as a repository for the past is Laura's attempts to record her father's existence in photographs that are pasted into an album in place of absent predecessors. At this point it is unclear why these photos have been taken, but one possible interpretation is that Laura is attempting to memorialize her father, who then suddenly disappears at the hands of forces seemingly beyond her understanding. We might, then, consider Laura's actions to be those of the post-memory work of the children of the *desaparecidos*.

Such an interpretation can be taken further. When Laura stumbles across the Polaroid camera in her first foray upstairs, she fumbles with it and accidentally photographs herself in close-up. When the photo develops, behind her is a white shape, which we later learn is Sofi. In a later scene, the terrified Laura even captures an image of the ghostly Sofi, as she attempts to find her way out of a pitch black room.

To use a Deleuzian concept, in this mediated image a virtual layer of the past is seen to haunt the present (Deleuze [1985] 2005, 66-94), another temporality's co-presence being, precisely, a recurrent trope of horror films (Powell 2005, 11). Ultimately the Polaroid photos provide a trail of clues that Laura leaves for herself to follow (in the pram and posted on the walls in the room where her father and Néstor entertained women), to discover her forgotten involvement in incest, her pregnancy and either an illegal abortion or infanticide. These photos reveal Nestor's and her father's guilt, positioning Laura as searching for a disappeared child, a spectre of the past reminiscent of both the *desaparecidos* and their illegally adopted children.

Here other recent Latin American films come to mind. A cinematic meditation on the 'impossibility' of capturing or recording the *desaparecidos* in photographs is a feature of both fiction and documentary films (e.g. *La noche de los lápices/Night of the Pencils* [Olivera, 1986]) (Grant 2003, 66), post-memory (*Los Rubios/The Blondes* [Carri, 2003])

(Page 2009, 203-205) and the blocked or censored past under dictatorship (*Al pie del árbol blanco/Standing at the Foot of the White Tree* [Neme, 2007]) (Martin-Jones and Montañez 2013b). Indeed, various Latin American films about lost pasts under dictatorships starring child protagonists explore the occluded or ‘disappeared’ virtual past’s haunting coexistence with the actual present (*Kamchatka* [Piñeyro, 2002]) (Martin-Jones 2011, 66-99). Similarly, *La casa muda* could be said to give prominence to photographs to evoke the activity of historical recreation involved in post-memory, adding weight to the national-allegorical interpretation seemingly evident in its iconography.

However, as noted previously, such interpretations seem unsatisfactory. The difficulty is that Sofi is the child of a sexual relationship that may have been incestuous, and it is for Sofi’s death that Laura seeks revenge. This is the case even if the exact cause of Sofi’s death is not entirely clear. This is the key to the enigma of the house (rather than any political mystery surrounding national history) and it is also here that we find a source for the film’s international appeal in its address to the issues of incest and abortion.

Abortion and incest

In the final conversation between Laura and Néstor we are given some ambiguous insights into the identity of the ghostly child haunting Laura. Their conversation points to the existence of a child, or at least a pregnancy, conceived by Laura and Néstor. Laura, kneeling over the prostrate and bound Néstor, spots her daughter’s ghost in a mirror and asks Néstor whether he misses her. As Néstor pleads with her to remember the past, Laura drowns him out with repeated shouts of ‘Shut up!’ before cutting out his tongue with rusty shears. She states: ‘*Mataron a mi bebé!*’/They killed my baby. In the context of the preceding conversation this slightly ambiguous expression (which can mean either you or they killed

my baby) seemingly refers to the guilt of both men. How Laura's child's died, however, remains unclear, even if the suggestion is either abortion or infanticide. In either case, the meaning of the 'silent house' on this reading is the silence surrounding such contemporary taboos as incest and abortion.

Once again, with the theme of abortion there is a temptation to follow a nationally-informed reading of the narrative. In 2008, three years before the film's release, the Uruguayan parliament voted to repeal a law that criminalized abortion, in place since 1938 (despite amendments). The repeal was passed by parliament, but was not ratified because the then-president, Tabaré Vázquez, vetoed it. Vázquez, the country's first left-wing president, gave his Catholic faith as the reason for this, a contentious decision for a country which has been, officially at least, a lay state since the beginning of the twentieth century. In 2011, the law was once again considered under the government of José Mujica (a former guerrilla fighter from the same political party as Vázquez), and in 2012 abortion was legalized. One of the most sensitive social issues on the Uruguayan political agenda, an allegorical reading of *La casa muda* could make a direct link between its exploration of abortion within the 'silent house' and Uruguay's ongoing re-negotiation of its national history. After all, the film was made amidst a nation's attempts to culturally negotiate how to accept such a legal change.

Nevertheless, much as Adam Lowenstein (2005) discusses the political complexities of the US horror film *The Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972) when interpreted as national allegory, *La casa muda* also 'both suggests and recoils' from any such interpretation (126). Whilst it certainly evokes such national-historical resonances (providing also a way in to broader and ongoing Latin American concerns over the body, state and religion), ultimately the house in the woods is a very 'un-national' location in which to focus on the patriarchal conditioning of female subjectivity.

Accordingly, a transnational or ‘non-national’ interpretation of *La casa muda* is the one that makes the most sense of its various aspects: its iconography, its play with the return of the virtual past, its narrative of incest and abortion. Despite the temptation to follow a national or Latin American allegorical approach – which arises due to the familiarity of the various aspects from more politically-oriented films from the region – the most apparent meaning of the virtual, blocked past of the ‘silent house’ is that which is most personal to Laura. Rojo and Hernández’s emphasis on the importance of character psychology in their film is, in fact, key. .

Character psychology and an alternative ‘rural’ temporality

When the house is first glimpsed through the trees by the approaching Laura, she stops in her tracks. The camera circles around to face her and she suddenly frowns. There is evidently a confused recognition and she looks inexplicably worried. This facial expression introduces the house. As the camera moves around her once more and racks focus, the house is the next thing we see. When Laura arrives at the house she attempts to look through the boarded-up windows. Her father interrupts her, expressing his puzzlement at her actions, as she should recognize the house they visited together previously. The boarded-up house, whose dark secrets cause the eruption of violent revenge for a past death, can therefore be understood as signifying the return of Laura’s forgotten or repressed personal memories. Laura’s personal issues relate to the broader taboos of incest and abortion, which, being intertwined with patriarchal control, are of interest to viewers globally.

Nevertheless, even this interpretation is not without its ambiguities. Typical of the horror genre’s offering of complex, perplexing or even incoherent explorations of social and historical issues (Hutchings 2004, 96-26), *La casa muda* suggests contrasting potential

interpretations of the significance of its protagonist's revenge. One obvious way to understand the film is as an anti-abortion narrative: Laura takes revenge on the perpetrators of the death of her child. This reading suggests a rather conservative film perhaps, but evidence is there to support it, for instance in the sudden appearance of the rosary in the bedroom at the point where Laura's past is revealed in the photographs. Laura's revenge, then, is the righteous action of one whose religious convictions have been wronged. Such a reading would explain Laura's curious behaviour when she photographs each of the two men in their death poses, placing the same doll on each. This is the doll that Laura is depicted holding as she walks away at the close of the film (in a coda that interrupts the credits of the original version at least), believing herself to be speaking to Sofi. In placing the doll on the men as she kills them (and when we see her do this to Néstor she shakes a baby's rattle as though communicating with Sofi), she is forcing them to recognize their proper roles as patriarchal figures in the lives of the young child they murdered.

Through these photographs, Laura is effectively recreating the familial lineage, or photobook, that should have been if traditional roles had been respected. Seen in this light, the vengeful Laura is looking to correct crimes against the institution of the family and the Catholic faith, and as she walks into the sunset with Sofi, her promise to take her to her grandmother simply restores something of the family's correct lineage.

Alternatively, the film can be seen as less critical of abortion per se than of the way in which male authority exploits women's bodies, reducing their ability to choose their own fate. In this light Laura's revenge seems to be motivated more by her exploitation as a sexual object, and the lack of choice she had over whether to keep Sofi. Laura's inflicting of deep wounds on the mouths of the men thus suggests an assault on hypocrisy, as patriarchal authority upholds the illegality of abortion whilst illegally pursuing this course of action when deemed necessary. Hence, we could view *La casa muda* within a tradition of films

critiquing patriarchy for threatening the life of a child (typically a young girl), which similarly conclude in the countryside, from Jacques Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau - Phantom Ladies Over Paris/Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974) to the Dardennes Brothers' *Le silence de Lorna/The Silence of Lorna* (2008).

We can add depth to this interpretation by considering Laura's instrument of death, the sickle that peeks out of her rucksack as she departs through the woods at the end of the original version. Her choice of weapon has resonances of rural working-class life, suggesting that she represents an existence prior to that of the urban lives of the contemporary viewers. This resonates with Karen Lury's (2010) work on the ghost child in J-Horror. For Lury, ghost children in J-Horror inhabit an eternal or cyclical time that subsists along 'with' the linear temporality of modernity, history and the nation-state. As such, these ghost children threaten the very coherence of such a project as the building of a national history and identity on the basis of a shared understanding of temporal continuity:

Their presence is therefore not simply about the representation, or re-emergence of the past in the present, instead their activities, demands and desires actually threaten the apparent coherence or unquestioned naturalness of the now that we understand as the present. (22)

Lury's interpretation of the temporal existence of these children in relation to modernity could be applied (admittedly against the grain of her original formation in relation to Japan) to explain *La casa muda*'s positing of an alternative time to that of patriarchy. This temporality is inhabited by the forgotten ghost of Sofi, and is coded in the film as rural, an almost literal temporal 'wilderness.' This alternative temporality re-emerges to render schizophrenic Laura's identity, providing her with a dual personality in terms of the two different histories that inform her present. The initial confusion as to who is the stalking

psychopath in the house, then, is caused by Laura living two presents simultaneously, one informed by a past in which the house is entirely absent (causing her anxiety and perplexity over the sinister events taking place), and one in which her traumatic past in the house is fully remembered (in which she therefore takes revenge on her father and Néstor for the death of Sofi). After all, it is in the woods that Laura's dual personality is first demonstrated by the cinematography, and it is also at that precise moment that Sofi is able to become fully embodied for Laura to see, as opposed to remaining glimpsed in a virtual form in photographs, flashbulb lights and mirrors within the house. *La casa muda*, then, is ultimately a film about Laura's personal past, which evokes larger issues surrounding women's bodies and roles in society (abortion, incest, the sex trade, motherhood), and which pertain to women under patriarchy globally. In line with Carol J. Clover's (1992, 124-137) seminal analysis of 'urbanoia' in horror films, the revenge of the countryside on unsuspecting out-of-place city dwellers for the city's exploitation of rurality, *La casa muda*'s rural setting suggests liberation from an abusive, perverse patriarchy through the return of (or to) a subsisting temporality, a blocked memory of the (pre-patriarchal) past. When Laura begins to become afraid in the house it is after hearing a sudden loud banging on the shutters, as though someone were trying to gain entrance. She tells her father: 'There is someone outside.' This 'outside' is an alternative temporality that grants Laura freedom from her past, as she finally burns the photographs of her former history as sexual object for her father and Néstor on an open fire in the woods. In the closing image of Laura and Sofi, this 'outside' is coded as matrilineal and idyllic, as Laura tells the ghostly Sofi of her grandmother and a visit they will pay to her, so as to take a boat trip together.

For all its false clues as to the possibility of a political (national) allegory, in the final analysis *La casa muda* is a film about a personal past that opens onto more globally applicable themes surrounding incest, abortion, and women's existence in relation to

patriarchy. It is these issues which best explain the eerie presence of the faceless characters in the paintings, the evocation of those written out of history, in so many parts of the world, by the silence surrounding them. Thus the film illustrates the intertwined production and aesthetic complexities surrounding how contemporary Uruguayan cinema negotiates its place in the international arena.

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¹ The interview was conducted in the offices of *Contenidos TV*, Montevideo on 18 August 2011. Unless otherwise stated, all information attributed to Rojo and Hernández in this article is taken from this interview. We thank the filmmakers for their generosity in spending time talking with us on a busy winter's day.