

## On the Vengeful Vulva: Lillah Halla's *Menarca* (2020)

Valeria Villegas Lindvall

A creature washes ashore in a Brazilian fishing town. It is tangled in a fishing net; we can only make out its skin, burned by the salt of the ocean, cracked and leathery, adorned with iridescent pearls (Figure 1). A crackling sound, like a muffled dolphin's call, intertwines with the hissing of the sea and its waves, while the camera moves capriciously between the creature's indiscernible body and the faces of eager fishermen that try to untangle it.



Figure 1: The creature (courtesy of Lillah Halla)

We move to another space, and behind the wired fence of a fishermen's shack is a prepubescent girl, Nanã (Amanda Yamamoto) who inquisitively gazes while José (Dinho Lima Flor) jokingly wonders whether the creature is "a boy or a girl." Insistent on categorizing the creature that is now supine on a wooden table, José licks his fingers and introduces them underneath the nets. The creature releases a painful wail, and a loud snap suggests that José's fingers have been severed in this action. Nanã averts her gaze, and the creature's shrill laments drown José's screaming as the camera scrambles to depict several fishermen holding it down, as if to reprimand its insolence. The scene is unbearable not only because of its suggestion of mutilation, but also because it confronts the viewer with the violent act of asserting power over a vulnerable body through sexual assault. Nanã's perspective acts as an anchor for the viewer, while the film unfolds the

relation that she builds with the creature—dubbed Baubo, a name only revealed to Nanã—whom she ultimately releases from captivity with the help of her friend Mel (Nathally Fonseca).

This short essay approaches the ways in which *Menarca*'s amplification of the creature's inscrutability highlights the transmogrification of difference and facilitates its understanding as resistance. I suggest that in *Menarca*, the horror elicited by the creature turns into a promise of reckoning, intimating that coalition is possible in the bond that Nanã and Baubo develop. I explore the film's implications behind the veiled suggestion of a vagina dentata turned something other, which finds productive kinship in Patricia MacCormack's theory of the becoming vulva (2010). Moreover, I draw a link between MacCormack's formulations and the vision that Rosi Braidotti (2021) articulates towards a liberation that challenges views of binarism imposed to hierarchize gender and animality/humanity.

### **A Note on Female Authorship and Genre in Brazil**

*Menarca* was, in great part, produced by a female crew. It was directed by Lillah Halla, co-written with Halla and Libia Perez, with cinematography by Wilsa Elsser, music by Karina Buhr and editing by Eva Randolph.<sup>1</sup> Halla and her collaborators continue a legacy of female labor in Brazilian horror filmmaking. This line was inaugurated by figures like editor Nilcemar Leyart—long-standing collaborator of José Mojica Marins 'Zé do Caixão,' figurehead of Brazilian horror— and filmmakers like Lygia Pape, whose short film *Wampirou* (1974) can be traced as the first female-directed horror film in the country (Puppo & Autran, 2007; Saldanha 2019, 77). Further, Pape's inaugural intervention illustrates the potentiality of short films as a crucial springboard for female filmmakers in the region, a phenomenon I note in my doctoral work (Villegas Lindvall 2021, 214). The first feature-length genre film directed by a woman was released a few years later—Rosângela Maldonado's *A mulher que põe a pomba no ar* (1978)—and with it, a statement on authorship, genre and gender started to take shape. Today, the relationship between violence and sexuality adopts new and nuanced forms in the work of contemporary filmmakers like Halla, Gabriela Amaral Almeida, Anita Rocha da Silveira, Juliana Rojas and Larissa Anzoategui, testing the limits of genre convention. Crucially, their labor continues to disprove the generalized notion that horror film is articulated "by and for sadistic men" as Katarzyna Paszkiewicz writes (2017, 42), which presumes

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<sup>1</sup> Halla is also the co-founder of Vermelha, a collective that brings together women and queer filmmakers in Brazil. "Lillah Halla." accessed 20 June, 2022, <https://www.lillahalla.com/>.

the incapability of women to author and enact fear in film. Feminist and female scholarship reveals that the politics of fear are unequivocally traversed by a binary gender hierarchy (Mulvey 1975, Clover 1992, Creed 1993, Williams 1996, Pinedo 1997) and can be reevaluated, reinforced and/or subverted through authorship (Paszkiwicz 2018, Pistors 2020, Peirse 2020)—a matter crucial to the reimagination of the menacing vulva that Halla’s *Menarca* offers.<sup>2</sup>

### On the Ravenous Opening

*Menarca* illustrates the pertinence of ambiguity as a mode of seeing that challenges a power play determined by binary gender. Crucially, the camera work jettisons the reproduction of sexual abuse and establishes a look that muddles its focus, rather than fully revealing the look of pain on Nanã’s or Baubo’s face. The presence of the creature is conveyed via sound—a crackling, almost dolphin-like wail—and partial, puzzle-like views of its body: close ups of hands cracked, the leathered skin, a mouth that appears like a voracious opening subsisting on the scraps of meat that Nanã feeds them. The ambiguous visual characterization of the creature is fundamental to ascertain the usefulness of suggestion: Elsser’s cinematography, abundant in blue hues and shallow depth of field, navigates the space by providing a collection of tight shots of the creature that refuse to display its body in full for the viewer.

Despite the explicit relationship that the story draws with the myth of the vagina dentata as a patriarchal phantasy, Baubo’s body becomes threatening because of its indeterminacy, its excess gesturing towards a continuous becoming that subverts the seemingly steadfast constraints of the gender binary. Its unclassifiable existence between the human and the non-human animal, I would suggest, underlines that “bodies are neither natural nor cultural but in constant process between them, as a heterogeneous assemblage of complex relational components” (Braidotti 2021, 42). Here, Braidotti proposes the possibility of redefining the subject by challenging the stifling taxonomies that have, historically and conveniently, associated humanity to white, cisgendered, male subjectivity.

The posthuman feminist turn that Braidotti proposes revisits the very articulation of subjectivity in its interlocking of race, class and gender as co-constitutive axis of oppression and domination. “The power of ‘Man’ as a

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<sup>2</sup> The film’s suggestion of the vagina dentata as a manifestation of patriarchal dread draws thematic similarities with Samantha Ribeiro’s segment for the anthology *Conceição — Autor bom é autor morto* (2007), which also features an instance of castration during the sexual act (Saldanha 2019, 81).

hegemonic civilizational model was instrumental to the project of Western modernity and the colonial ideology of European expansion,” she writes (2021, 54). The author recuperates what anti-colonial theorists have elucidated (Fanon 2021 [1952], Wynter 2000, Maldonado-Torres 2007, Lugones 2012, Ko 2019): the naturalized encumbering of Man as the subject of Western Humanism, a project in line with the teleological nature of colonial modernity within which racialized, feminized and animalized existences become subordinated to this universal, ontological point of reference. Provocatively, Baubo embodies an extreme otherness that confronts the model of Man predicated as a standard of subjectivity: their excessive anatomy, exacerbated by the evasive gaze of the camera, confounds the hierarchization of the human and non-human animal, of woman and man—it is ontologically unclassifiable.

Baubo’s ambiguous depiction confounds precisely “because it collapses binary machines and liberates desire through becoming-more-than-one” (MacCormack 2010b, 96). In other words, their existence in the interstices of animality and humanity, masculinity, and femininity, issues a challenge to neat classification and, therefore, throws the illusion of hierarchy in a tailspin. The creature is met with derision by the fishermen, entrapped as a threat and condemned to exclusion. I would argue that, in precise strokes, this rejection reminds us of the terror of practical exclusion and violence enacted on the body that proves unruly towards classification under colonial parameters of “Humanity,” precipitating the alienation of “women and LGBTQ+ people (sexualized others), Black and Indigenous people (racialized others) and the animals, plants and earth entities (naturalized others)” to further the notion that “‘Man’ is One and fully entitled” (Braidotti 2021, 54). Baubo reads as the confounding amalgamation of the sexualized and naturalized others in Braidotti’s address. The creature becomes an inexorable fold between categories, ready to trouble and horrify the neat and stifling hierarchies that result from the establishment of ‘Man’ as a universalizing measure of subject.

Consequently, the recognizable vagina dentata becomes an ambiguous fold, illustrating the possibilities of the “becoming vulva” conceptualized by MacCormack. The author’s theory negotiates the Deleuzian formulation of the fold and Luce Irigaray’s model of the two lips (1985, 24-35) to articulate difference as a challenge to the reification of binaries. MacCormack’s model of the becoming vulva illuminates the ways in which Baubo’s elusive corporeality suggests an ambiguity that resists the sameness of phallogocentric models. The author’s articulation gestures towards a horror of the fold that resides in the proverbial patriarchal heart, conceiving that “vulva is a demon,” multiple and embodying the fluid possibility of futures proscribed by phallogocentrism (2010a, 103). In her

formulations, vulva is an eternal unfolding: rather than a prescriptive reinforcement of gender binaries, it offers a model descriptive of futures outside of the universalizing, colonial Humanism that Braidotti indicts. Baubo's "vaginal 'aperture' is a volitional hole, both penetrable and ingurgitant" (MacCormack 2010a: 93). This is to say, Baubo's unknowability is also a promise of what can be, a body of possibility that illustrates the weaponization of difference and reconciles the colonial, patriarchal rift between the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, in Braidotti's words.

Such futures are also signaled by the vastly different reactions that Baubo elicits, which appear to be gendered. Their anatomy escapes comprehension from the fishermen and sparks their violence, but invites compassion in Nanã, who insistently asks the creature how did they manage "to put a piranha down there."<sup>3</sup> The reason of her insistence is gut-wrenching: threaded as a series of fleeting instances in which Nanã covers herself at the sight of José, the relationship of sexual abuse between both characters is fully revealed by the end of the film, when he goes to Nanã's home enquiring about her. An unsteady close-up captures her profile as she puts her hair up, as if in gesture of resignation to the abuse to come. However, the next frame shifts the gesture to suggest ritual preparation for revenge—a beheaded piranha, its body almost translucent, flaps about in a white bucket, staining the water with a red ribbon of blood (Figure 2, next page). A severance between head and body has been enacted to configure the new body of Nanã, the human/non-human animal amalgam, the fold that becomes an extreme other.

Nanã confronts José, gaze fixed on his face as he enters a room. She follows, and the camera pans down, showing a ribbon of dark blood running down her leg. She crosses the threshold as if entering a different state. As the door closes behind her back, the viewer is left out of the room, in expectation: a loud snap comes followed by José's desperate yells. An ultimate alliance has taken place, and Nanã is suggested as the unforgiving unfolding of Baubo: the vulva has exacted its revenge. Not a point of entry or violation, but the viscous herald of reckoning for patriarchal abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the vulva as a terrible fold also comes across in the name that Halla and Perez's script gives to the creature: Baubo appears as a servant engaging in *anasyrma* (exposure of her genitals) to the goddess Demeter in the Orphic version of a tale of Demeter and Persephone (Suter 2007, 21). In this context, the *anasyrma* carries with it a sense of protection more than shame: the vulva is displayed as "a gesture of revelation that is unexpected and startling" that holds a powerful "ability to expose the forbidden" (Suter 2007, 21, 24). In light of this context, I would argue that, in a figurative fashion, the loaded nature of Baubo's name puts the threat of the fold at the center of *Menarva*.

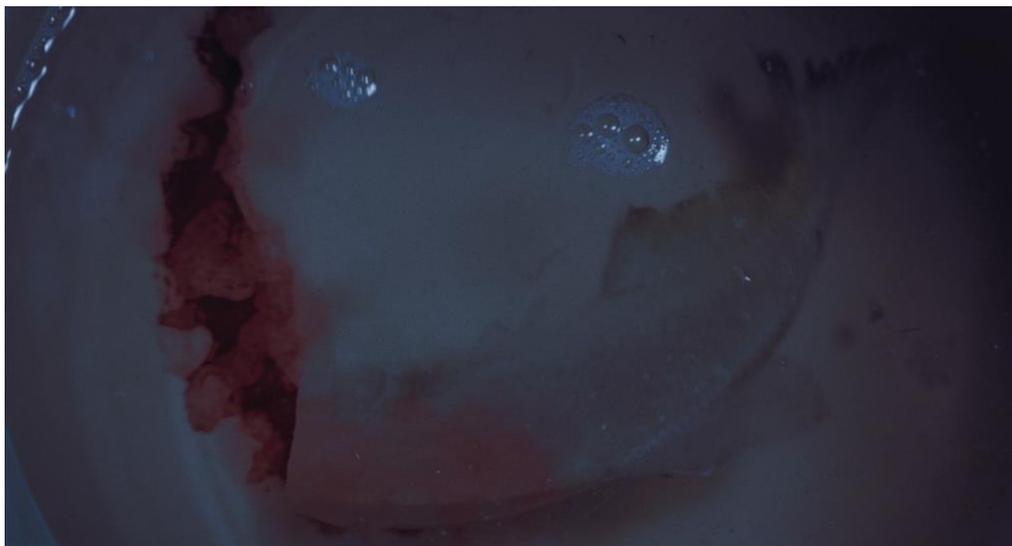


Figure 2. The beheaded piranha (courtesy of Lillah Halla)

Nanã's body becomes an amalgamation of human and non-human animal, unfathomable and dangerous. She fashions herself as Baubo and with this gesture, embraces the nature of the indiscernible. Consequently, the motif of the vagina dentata is transformed into an unknown, an embodiment of the becoming vulva that MacCormack conceptualizes. She becomes a posthuman arrangement, a coalition of forms that challenges phallogocentric conceptions of subjectivity. Ultimately, the human animal and the non-human animal become one to exact revenge over sexual violence condoned and bred by patriarchal organizations of labor and domestic life. The triumph of the monstrous indiscernibility that survives in Nanã's new-found vagina dentata-come-becoming vulva is heralded during the revealing ending: José's desperate screams blend into Nanã's and Mel's, as a stark transition reveals both children fiercely screaming by the pier, frenzied as the camera refuses to stay steady and their bodies contort, dancing riotously. The final frame positions the camera behind the characters, both bodies shrinking in a wide shot of the sea that has welcomed Baubo again. The scene suggests a radical gesture of abandon, of joyful confrontation: the becoming vulva is reclaimed in power. Baubo, Nanã and Mel have embraced the indeterminacy of the vengeful vulva.

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**Valeria Villegas Lindvall** is Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of Gothenburg and specializes in Latin American horror film with a feminist and decolonial focus. Reviews Editor for *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* and member of the advisory board of MAI Imprint at Punctum Books. She has collaborated in several publications, most prominently at *Rolling Stone Mexico*, *Women Make Horror* (2020), *The Body Onscreen in the Digital Age* (2021) and *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* (2023).

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