



## The Headless Woman

**Director:** Lucrecia Martel  
**Country:** Argentina  
**Date:** 2008

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

In the past decade, there have been three great films about guilt, denial and the return of the repressed: Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* in 2004, Michael Haneke's *Hidden* in 2005 – and this is the third, *La Mujer Sin Cabeza*, or *The Headless Woman*, directed by Lucrecia Martel and co-produced by Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar. It is a masterly, disturbing and deeply mysterious film about someone who strenuously conceals from herself the knowledge of her own guilt.

Each time I have seen it, this film has swirled residually in my subconscious for days, and each time I have witnessed exactly the same spectacle outside the cinema afterwards: knots of people excitably, grumpily arguing about it. Some denounce it for being boring, wilfully obscure arthouse stuff – and, yes, be warned, it is a difficult, challenging film – while others, like onlookers trying to piece together events leading up to a robbery, frantically ask each other what happened and where and how and why. Then there's a smaller group, including me, dazed and wondering if what we have seen is not a portrait of a guilty person, but rather the autobiographical and minutely realistic dream this person is having.



*The Headless Woman* is set among an extended wealthy family in Argentina. Maria Onetto plays Verónica, an elegant, middle-aged woman who works as a dentist. Driving back from a family get-together, Verónica hits something in her car – bang! – her forehead lurches forward and appears to smash either into the steering wheel or the windshield, and whiplashes back. Verónica brakes and for a long, long moment, Martel's camera holds the shot of her profile: as she sits immobile and silent in the car. Is she in shock? Is she gazing at what she has hit in the rear-view mirror? For the first time, we see a child's handprint on the driver's-side window, a handprint which, in some kind of nightmarish continuity error appears to change position in the next shot.

But couldn't that just be from the kids who were larking around her car at the party earlier? We turn with Verónica, and all we can see at this stage is a dead dog in the distance, which in an earlier scene had been with some boys playing by the roadside.

Verónica returns home: clearly traumatised. She cannot answer simple questions; she is confused. But it is not merely the physical impact. Verónica is dealing with the awful suspicion that she killed not merely the dog, but its owner. She has killed a child. Verónica confesses as much, in a quiet, wondering voice, to her husband, perhaps conveying an unspoken instruction that he and the menfolk of the family – doctors and medical types well connected with the cops – should handle this situation.

Martel's movie intuitively imitates her concussed state, a state which embraces evasive semi-consciousness. Shots are asymmetrically composed in such a way that we can't be sure what we are supposed to be looking at: Verónica, with her faint, not-all-there smile, will be in one part of the screen, while someone else, in another part, will be quietly getting something sorted. Like Verónica, the film glimpses the truth out of the corner of its eye. The sound design is such that voices that we think are emanating from just behind the camera, near Verónica, are coming from people talking in the middle distance: belatedly, we match the sound to their moving lips.



Often, people talking to Verónica will be seen only from the neck down – they are headless, like the famous photo of the "headless man" in the 1963 Duchess of Argyll divorce case. Her disorientation becomes most disturbing when she goes with a family party to visit an ancient aunt, who is suffering from dementia, and who complains that her apartment with its ancient furniture is filled with squeaks, like the sounds of the dead. In the same state of suppressed panic that she perceives everything else, Verónica sees that this old woman is a kindred spirit; she too must now live with ghosts.

But even here the complications and agonies are not complete. This is not the first time Verónica has had to swallow a secret and live a lie. There is another elephant in the living room she has to feed. A long, mysterious trip to a hotel just after the accident, and sexualised encounters with two different - family members, indicate that avoidance, secrecy and denial are lifelong habits.

This is not an easy film to watch, or to understand, but the potency with which it resonates in the imagination is remarkable. Lucrecia Martel's other films, *The Swamp* (2001) and *The Holy Girl* (2004) have both had something of this spacey, floating style, but never before has it been applied to something so painful, so relevant, and never before has she delivered such a psychologically real portrait: demonstrating in both style and content what happens when we go into denial. I'm as certain as I can be of the towering talent of Lucrecia Martel, but I can't quite be certain of exactly what *The Headless Woman* is about. For example: the child's handprint changing position ... did I just imagine that? You tell me.

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