

Uncertainty in the Face of the (all too) Visible:  
The Fantastic in the Film Adaptation of *Distancia de rescate*

1. Introduction: A contemporary fantastic novel and its movie adaptation

One of the most important global crises,<sup>1</sup> topic at the centre of this collective volume, is without a doubt the permanently growing pollution of our planet. In Argentina, pollution, especially in agriculture, is a particularly urgent matter.<sup>2</sup> This topic was taken up in a highly interesting way – provoking far-reaching reactions – by the novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014) by Samanta Schweblin, one of the most acclaimed Latin American authors of our time. However, extensive pollution of the environment and above all the water is only one way to explain the strange events the novel relates. Besides this rational explanation, the novel also offers another, supernatural one: a ubiquitous presence of evil in the remote rural region where the action takes place, fought by further supernatural phenomena, including transmigrations of souls. As none of the two solutions prevails over the other, *Distancia de rescate* can be considered a perfect example of a fantastic novel according to Todorov's classic definition, a novel that fulfils all prerequisites of the "fantastique pur".<sup>3</sup> This also seems the main reason why Schweblin does not approve of the title of the book's German translation at all, for the chosen title, *Das Gift*, is, in her opinion, too

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1 For the proliferation of crises that affect our contemporary world and especially the narrative representation of these (and other) crises as well as the function of such „crisis narratives“ see the recent contribution of Ansgar and Vera Nünning: „Krise als medialer Leitbegriff und kulturelles Erzählmuster: Merkmale und Funktionen von Krisennarrativen als Sinnstiftung über Zeiterfahrung und als literarische Laboratorien für alternative Welten“, in: *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 70 (2020), p. 241–278.

2 In Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, illnesses caused by pollution have reached vertiginous levels, cf. Esteban Villaseñor: „*Distancia de rescate*: el nuevo thriller latinoamericano que tienes que ver“, in: *Vogue México*, 13.10.2021, [www.vogue.mx/estilo-de-vida/articulo/distancia-de-rescate-en-netflix-significado-y-explicacion-de-la-pelicula](http://www.vogue.mx/estilo-de-vida/articulo/distancia-de-rescate-en-netflix-significado-y-explicacion-de-la-pelicula) (09.12.2022): “[S]egún cifras de la organización de sostenibilidad Es Global, en 12 países de América Latina y el Caribe, liderados por Brasil y Argentina, el envenenamiento por productos químicos en alimentos causan el 15% de las enfermedades registradas por la Organización Panamericana de la Salud.”

3 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, p. 37f. and 48f.

unambiguous and restricts a priori the array of the text's possible interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

We will later come back to the original title *Distancia de rescate*, which is also the original, Spanish title of the movie adaptation that has been made recently: after having been shown at the San Sebastián Festival in September of 2021, the film was released on Netflix one month later. This movie adaptation is at the centre of our contribution, in which we will try to illustrate, first, how the novel's fantastic dimension is transposed to the screen and discuss, later, possible reasons for the noticeable interest in the fantastic in cinema and television in the last years, for which this film is a revealing example.

For a start, it might be of interest to mention that the movie's screenplay was written by Schweblin herself together with the movie's director Claudia Llosa. Llosa is not only another highly influential Latin American artist of our time, but can above all be considered a perfect choice for a movie about important contemporary problems in Latin America as her first two movies, *Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada*, deal with central conflicting issues of contemporary Peruvian society. Not the least of them are the seemingly unsurmountable differences between the big cities and the remote regions that reappear in some way in *Distancia de rescate*, where they are represented by the two narrative instances, Amanda and Carola, and their dialogue full of misunderstandings.<sup>5</sup> For Samanta Schweblin on the other hand, this movie adaptation is in a certain matter a return because she studied film before starting to write her praised short stories and novels. Maybe this background also explains why these literary works almost always contain a strong filmic dimension; many of Schweblin's texts can even be described as pertinent examples of a filmic literature. This is particularly true for *Distancia de rescate*, where filmic elements abound, but, except for one key element which we will mention later, we cannot deepen this aspect in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Cf. a commentary made by Samanta Schweblin in a conversation with Guy Helmingier und Navid Kermani during the *Literarischer Salon* in Cologne (16.05.2019).

5 Furthermore, Llosa's third movie, *Aloft* (2014), focuses on a highly problematic relationship between a mother and her child, a central subject of all of Samanta Schweblin's work that is particularly developed in *Distancia de rescate*. In addition, in *Distancia de rescate* a desperate mother falls back on the help of an occult power to save her severely ill child, which is also a crucial element of *Aloft*.

6 One particularly important filmic element of the novel concerns the noticeable closeness of the conversation situation between Amanda und David that frames the whole story

## 2. The movie's plot

To have a basis for the following observations, we will shortly summarize the movie's plot that is, with slight changes, the one of the novel. The film starts with an extremely ill Amanda, who, in the middle of a forest, is having a conversation with David, a young boy, who accompanies her in her last moments before death. David wants Amanda to relate her last days so that she can “entender lo importante” (“understand what's important”), as he puts it.<sup>7</sup> Amanda begins to tell her story, guided by David's questions, and we, the movie viewers, see the events unfold before our eyes: we see Amanda coming with her little daughter Nina from the city to a small village to spend the summer. There, in a house with a garden and a pool, she meets Carola, David's mother, and the two women become friends. Soon Carola tells Amanda that some years ago David fell so ill that she brought him in panic to the lady of the green house, a witch who she thought to be the only person able to save her son's life. The witch tells her that a transmigration of souls is the only possibility to save the child: she plans to split soul and body to reduce the poison within David and transfer his soul to another person so that his body can survive. Carola accepts this terrifying proposal, and the procedure seems to work for David survives. But the consequences are sinister according to Carola – she is sure that during the procedure another soul has occupied David's body so that he has changed from a happy child to an enigmatic and frightening person who accompanies living beings to death, or as she puts it bluntly: he is not her son anymore, but a “monster” (33:02). Amanda's reaction to Carola's story is very clear: she classifies it as “una barbaridad” (“insane”, 30:19) and does not believe a single word (33:22: “No puedo creerme

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to a cinema: Amanda states that she cannot see clearly the things directly surrounding her (cf. Samanta Schweblin: *Distancia de rescate*, 2nd ed., Barcelona 2015 [2014], p. 11 (all the citations are taken from this version): “Está oscuro y no puedo ver.”), whereas the events of her past unfold in sharp pictures and with a strong power of immersion before her eyes (cf. *ibid.*, p. 13: “estoy anclada en este relato, lo veo perfectamente”). Moreover, a visual isotopy characterizes the whole framing conversation underscoring even more the parallels with a movie theatre. Within this frame many other striking examples of a filmic dimension can be found in several scenes that Amanda narrates, not the least being the sudden apparition of “chicos extraños [...] chicos con deformaciones” in front of her car just before dawn (cf. *ibid.*, p. 107f.), a scene that is typical of so many horror films.

- 7 Claudia Llosa: *Distancia de rescate*, Chile/Peru/Spain/USA 2021, 01:31: “Tenés que entender lo importante”; all citations are taken from this version of the movie.

semejante historia”/“I can’t believe a story like this”). Nevertheless, several disturbing events occur shortly after the mothers’ talk and Amanda finally takes the decision to take Nina back to the city. However, she hesitates, returns to the village and during a last encounter with Carola in the huge farm complex, where the latter one works, Amanda and Nina get very ill themselves and have to be brought to the village’s small hospital.

With this life-threatening disease we come back to the start of the movie and the framing conversation between Amanda and David, who is to bring her to the green house, and we understand that Amanda is not so concerned about the perspective of her own death, but about the fate of her daughter who has been brought shortly before by Carola to the green house as well: Amanda fears that her daughter will never be the same again after having undergone the magic procedure David had to endure and so she wants to reach the green house to save Nina or rather Nina’s soul. But before even getting near the witch’s house, Amanda dies and in a kind of epilogue we see the two fathers, who both do not have any affective bound to their respective children, Nina and David, anymore and do not understand what has happened during Amanda’s last days of life (after which Carola has left her husband and son).<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The fantastic in *Distancia de rescate*: Techniques

However: what *has really* happened? Are Amanda’s and Carola’s narrations reliable accounts of the diegetic reality? There are important reasons to doubt this, and above all two elements are key for creating a thorough doubt concerning these two central narrations in the movie and we will have a closer look at both. First of all, Amanda, the main narrative instan-

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8 In this epilogue Nina’s father appears for the first time on the screen (except one very short and disturbing appearance in a nightmare of Amanda) and David’s father only has had short appearances in the memories of his wife before, and it is evident that both of them do not often see, let alone take a real interest in their children. These very cool relationships between the fathers and their children provide a clue of crucial importance in both reality systems the film evokes: if we follow the supernatural explanation and believe in the transmigration of souls, the movie’s final sequence gives numerous hints that Nina’s soul has past to David’s body, what her father does not notice at all, underscoring he has never really known his daughter. This estrangement from his child offers, on the other hand, another, in this case completely rational, explanation for the – in the eyes of the fathers! – strange behaviour of the children – caused by their fathers’ lack of affection.

ce during most of the movie, is in no way trustworthy. She is in agony, extremely weakened and probably affected by a strong fever. What is more, she is in terrible fear because of her daughter, whom she never has left alone before; the eponymous *distancia de rescate*, which should guarantee Nina's safety at any time is the most important aspect of her whole life – one has to call it a psychotic obsession. That she cannot secure this *distancia* anymore and has to accept that others will decide about the fate of her severely ill child obviously makes her lose her mind. This finds a pertinent illustration in the fact that her narration becomes more and more confused, and she mixes up nightmares with presumably real events, what also underscores her feverish agony and puts the credibility of her story even more in doubt. These doubts that the spectator cannot help but feel find their adequate expression in a sentence uttered by Amanda herself as she asks herself if she is really talking to David (33:38): “Ni siquiera sé si esto está ocurriendo.” (“I don't even know if all this really happens.”)

Indeed, does she really talk to David, in addition in a wood and not in the hospital? And is this David really a migrated soul of a dark person in a child's body?<sup>9</sup> In order to try to answer this question we have to stress that all the doubts a viewer will have about Amanda's story are in the same way true for Carola's. The two women reflect themselves in many ways and most of all in their problematic credibility. Interestingly, the doubts about the veracity of the related events reach their culmination during the account of the alleged transmigration of David's soul, which is the decisive magic element of the whole story, the central event in favour of a supernatural interpretation. We have already mentioned that Amanda does not believe this, from a start extremely improbable, story, and she has good reasons for this disbelief which is also likely to reflect the viewer's perspective: Carola is in a clear and thorough state of panic when she

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9 It might be interesting to add here that Schweblin's texts have several times been compared to the works of David Lynch (see for example Claire Allfree: “David Lynch, eat your heart out: Samanta Schweblin's uncanny short stories”, in: *The Telegraph*, 10.2.2019, [www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/david-lynch-eat-heart-samanta-schweblins-uncanny-short-stories/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/david-lynch-eat-heart-samanta-schweblins-uncanny-short-stories/) (15.1.2023) and Lucía De Leone: “Campos que matan. Espacios, tiempos y narración en *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin”, in: 4529F. *Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada* 16 (2016), p. 62–76, here p. 72), and one can presume that the Christian name of this frightening (?) boy and therefore one of the most important uncanny elements might be a hint to one of Schweblin's most important models – what would also further strengthen the already mentioned filmic dimension of the novel.

brings her ill son to the lady of the green house who in addition gives her a tea that most likely has some hallucinating effect. Moreover, Carola does not even see anything of the ceremony, as she has to wait in front of a closed door (so that the procedure itself is not visible for her nor the viewer). Finally, Carola finishes her narration of the transmigration with the already cited commentary that David has turned into a monster and this statement is immediately contradicted by David himself who in the framing conversation with Amanda retorts (33:07): “No soy un monstruo. Soy un chico normal.” (“I’m not a monster. I’m a normal boy.”) This response to the most important aspect of Carola’s narration, which is furthermore expressed in a calm matter that could not contrast more with Carola’s flustered narration, subverts even more any confidence in the veracity of the told events.

In conclusion, we hear a highly unlikely story of a rationally impossible event related by a witness whose credibility is severely destabilized and that within another story whose narrator, Amanda, is also anything but trustworthy. For this dimension it cannot be overlooked either that almost immediately after David’s harsh rejection of her mother’s story, Amanda says the already cited crucial sentence “Ni siquiera sé si esto está ocurriendo”, which is key to the lack of confidence a viewer puts in her, so that both narrative instances undergo severe damage of their credibility in only one minute time.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the nesting of unreliable narrative instances heightens the doubts we have to feel about a decisive element of the plot, which is placed at the very centre of the nesting,<sup>11</sup>

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10 Moreover, there is another doubt concerning the credibility of both narrators, due, in this case, to their relationship to Nina. Amanda suspects that Carola wants to have Nina for herself, to replace her own child, David, to whom she has lost all connection, and takes the small girl for this reason to the green house (hoping that the soul of the girl would pass to her son’s body, what maybe indeed happens, see note 8 above). There are some details that seem to foster such an interpretation (for example Carola says at one moment she wishes she “had a Nina for [her]self” (54:40: “Cómo me gustaría una Nina para mí”), which would indicate severe psychological problems and destabilize further Carola’s credibility (and at the same time, we could find here a rational explanation for David’s strange behaviour, who could be traumatized by the rejection by his mother). However, it seems as likely that this presumption is another expression of Amanda’s paranoia, who is not able to think rationally when her daughter is involved, which would on the other hand damage further her credibility. Due to the movie’s consequent fantastic dimension, it is impossible to judge with certainty which option is correct, but both undermine thoroughly (at least) one of the narrations we are confronted with.

11 In the frame of this article, we can only mention shortly, without developing this further, that this nesting of different narrative instances is executed in an intricate way that

the transmigration of David's soul. This shades another big doubt over the conversation that forms the movie's frame because David's presence near the dying Amanda only is admissible if he is no longer a normal child but a migrated soul that help others die.<sup>12</sup>

That the credibility of all narrative instances is heavily put into doubt, is decisive for considering the film as belonging to the fantastic genre, for with Uwe Durst, whose work is a valuable complement of Todorov's, we can state that "the destabilization of the narrator forms the basis of fantastic literature".<sup>13</sup> Exactly the same is true for a movie<sup>14</sup> and this leads us directly to the second central element of *Distancia de rescate* that destabilizes the narrator. With this element we come back to the mentioned filmic aspects of Schweblin's novel and have to take into account one crucial difference between the novel and its adaptation, which is due to the mediatic differences between literature and film. In the book we have, of course, only Amanda's description of the events in words. In the movie, however, we actually *see* what she tells and can, therefore, compare the images with her narration. And we quickly realize contradictions, for

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further heightens the movie's fantastic dimension. To give only one example: when, in the beginning, the scene changes from the forest to the vacation house's garden it seems that David is calling Amanda from the higher diegetic level of the framing conversation and she seems to hear him in the garden, that is a lower diegetic level, what has to be, should this be the case, considered a metalepsis and underscores, at any rate, the permeability between the different levels, which can be seen as another element of the movie's fantastic dimension, as paradoxical narrative techniques and the fantastic often go hand in hand (cf. Nina Grabe/Sabine Lang/Klaus Meyer-Minnemann (eds.): *La narración paradójica. "Normas narrativas" y el principio de la "transgresión"*, Frankfurt am Main/Madrid 2006).

- 12 And if we believe him being a migrated soul this supports the assumption (though does not, of course, prove with certainty) that the sickness he (or rather his predecessor in this body) suffered has no rational explicable cause, but rather a supernatural one. This aspect is not always considered in the articles dealing with the novel, which in some cases explain Amanda's and Nina's illness strictly rationally (by the polluted water), without taking into account, that the obviously supernatural transmigration of souls (that is taken for granted in these studies) is hardly compatible with such a rationalized cosmos (see for example De Leone: Campos que matan).
- 13 Cf. Uwe Durst: *Theorie der phantastischen Literatur*, 2nd ed., Berlin 2007, p. 198: „die Destabilisierung des Erzählers ist die Basis phantastischer Literatur“; see also *ibid.*, p. 185.
- 14 Cf. the exhaustive study of Claudia Pinkas, who focusses explicitly on film and states that "die phantastische Ambiguität [...] insbesondere auch aus einer bestimmten Form eines mehrdeutigen, destabilisierten Erzählerdiskurses hervorgeht." (Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film. Instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*, Berlin/New York, 2010, p. 2).

which we only want to give a single example that can be found at the very beginning of Amanda's report. When she relates how she saw David for the first time, she states: "Me tiemblan las manos" ("My hands are shaking"), but we see that her hands grasp firmly the steering wheel of the car without the slightest shaking – and David underscores this discrepancy commenting laconically that there is "no shaking" of the hands (6:05), so that the viewer cannot miss this contradiction.

So, we are confronted with a remarkable discrepancy between the images we see and the words with which Amanda describes them, or in other words: a discrepancy between the verbal and the visual narration, which subverts even further the already highly problematic credibility of the main narrative instance.<sup>15</sup> For all these reasons it is undecidable if Amanda is really talking to David and dies on a boat near the forest or is having a fever dream and passes away alone in the hospital.<sup>16</sup> In the same way David's nature cannot be classified with certainty: has he changed due to magic transmigration or are there other, totally rational explanations for his startling behaviour (and for Nina's which is alluded to by her father in the epilogue)?<sup>17</sup>

Because of this fundamental undecidability our movie can be considered, exactly like the novel it is based on, an excellent example for a fantastic work in Todorov's sense – and proves this way that Adolfo Bioy Casares, one of the most important models for Schweblin's literature,<sup>18</sup> is certainly not right, when he states:

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15 Cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film*, p. 111. It is no coincidence that this discrepancy suits the fantastic so well, for it reproduces in a certain way the *rupture* central in Caillois' classic conception of the fantastic, which proves particularly useful for movies (where such *ruptures*, for example between image and narration, can be achieved rather simply).

16 Therefore, there exists an interesting parallel, that would deserve a closer look, with Borges' *cuento* "El sur", in which we also find two possible interpretations of the narrated events that exclude themselves mutually, and one of them is a death in a hospital.

17 In David's case one might think of the difficult relationship to his mother who seems incapable of loving him anymore (see note 10 above) or a rejection by his father, who blames him for the death of the stallion, or in general the bad mood that affects the whole family after the horse has died and with it all the family's hope for a better life. In Nina's case the death of her mother alone (and even more under its terrifying circumstances) could account for a profound change in her personality.

18 Schweblin states that "Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar, Antonio di Benedetto, fueron mis grandes maestros argentinos" (Victoria Torres: "Entrevista a Samanta Schweblin, Premio Juan Rulfo 2012", in: *Iberoamericana* 13 (2013), p. 175–178, here p. 175). See also Paola Tinoco: "Samanta Schweblin: Lo fantástico de la realidad", in: *VICE*, 19.7.2013,



[C]reo que ese género [el género fantástico], Méliès me lo perdona, no es adecuado para el cine. [...] Cuando lo fantástico se muestra me parece menos fácil de aceptar. En general podemos decir que lo fantástico no es fotogénico para el cine; la mente acepta cualquier historia, la vista, no.<sup>19</sup>

Despite his thorough comprehension of cinema, Bioy clearly underestimates its possibilities to foster the fantastic<sup>20</sup> – especially within the visual field on which he explicitly focusses, as *Distancia de rescate* shows impressively and not only by introducing contradictions between the diegetic and the mimetic narration as we have already discussed, but also thanks to another genuine filmic technique that takes us back once again to the framing conversation between Amanda and David. Of course, we do see the two in the forest and hear their conversation, but the scene’s “Realitätsstatus” is in no way clear, as we cannot know if we are confronted with the perspective of the (non-focalized) extradiegetic “camera”, which would grant the reality of this scene within the diegetic universe, or an internal focalization, a “mindscreen” of Amanda, which would reveal that the whole conversation with David is nothing else than a (fever) dream.<sup>21</sup> We find here another undecidability, which continues at the film’s end, for comparable doubts about the diegetic veracity of the events affect all the scenes in Carola’s house after Amanda falls ill – are these strange events also not only part of a dream of Amanda, who is already in the hospital? These doubts seem even more justified as Amanda has already mixed up reality and (bad) dreams before, as mentioned above. So, the

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[www.vice.com/es\\_latam/article/9b7pwa/samanta-schweblin-lo-fantastico-de-la-realidad-000230-v6n5](https://www.vice.com/es_latam/article/9b7pwa/samanta-schweblin-lo-fantastico-de-la-realidad-000230-v6n5) (19.09.2022).

- 19 Adolfo Bioy Casares cited in Alberto Tabbia: “Como los de la vida, los recuerdos del cine”. La influencia del cine y de la fotografía en la vida y obra de uno de los más importantes escritores argentinos contemporáneos”, in: *La Nación*, 4.5.1986, p. 27. A comparable thought can be found in Bioy Casares’s diaries: “Después de ver una comedia menor y fantástica, he pensado que el elemento fantástico es difícil de manejar en el cine.” (Bioy Casares: *Descanso de caminantes. Diarios íntimos*, ed. by Daniel Martino, Buenos Aires 2001, p. 364).
- 20 And Bioy is far from being an exception: a lot of authors as well as (literary) critics have put forward comparable (and in the end untenable) opinions, cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film*, p. 50f.
- 21 Cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film*, p. 58: “der fiktionale Spielfilm [kennt] spezifische Verfahren zur Erzeugung von Ambiguität, die zum einen darin bestehen, dass der Realitätsstatus der gezeigten Szene unbestimmt gelassen wird, indem nicht geklärt wird, welche Art der Perspektive (Erzähler- vs. Figurenperspektive, Außensicht auf das Geschehen vs. *Mindscreen*) dem Erzählten jeweils zugrunde liegt.”; for further information about the internal focalization and the “mindscreen” cf. *ibid.*, p. 133.

question what really has happened in the diegetic universe is also via this means, the ambiguity of the point of view, permanently put into focus and at the same time undecidable.

In conclusion, Llosa's and Schweblin's film has to be considered a perfect example of a fantastic movie that makes use of a variety of (filmic) techniques to achieve a "conurrencia de las versiones"<sup>22</sup> of the narrated events which cannot be resolved definitely.

#### 4. The fantastic in *Distancia de rescate* and in contemporary cinema: Interpretation

*Distancia de rescate* is anything but a unique case; on the contrary: not least this volume with its many and diverse examples proves that we are presently witnessing a remarkable presence of the fantastic in film and television. This revival of the genre calls for explaining its reasons and focussing again on *Distancia de rescate* especially one explanation seems to deserve a closer look. It certainly will not solve the finally insoluble question what has happened in the diegetic world of Amanda, Carola and David, but it might shed some light on the recent popularity of the fantastic on the screen.

As we have already mentioned, David underscores right at the beginning that Amanda has to understand "lo importante" in her last days ("what's important", 1:31). This can also be seen as a commentary directed to the viewer who should try to see as well "the important elements" in the pictures recounting these days he/she is watching.<sup>23</sup> And when Amanda directly responds asking twice "qué es lo importante?" ("but what's important?", 01:39 and 05:20), she articulates a question that the viewer may also ask himself/herself. David's answer is, at first sight, not very helpful: "los detalles" ("the details", 05:26). But exactly here seems to lie a decisive clue for explaining the importance of the fantastic in our movie and its general popularity in today's cinema: as viewers we

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22 We take this striking description from Pedro Luis Barcia who uses it in his analysis of a key text of the Argentinean fantastic literature, Adolfo Bioy Casares's "El perjurio de la nieve" (Pedro Luis Barcia: "Introducción biográfica y crítica", in: Bioy Casares, Adolfo: *La trama celeste*, ed. by Pedro Luis Barcia, Madrid 2011, p. 9–63, here p. 20).

23 David clearly emphasizes this dimension, as he tells Amanda right at the beginning "lo que ves vos, lo veremos todos" ("what you see, we all see", 01:50), unequivocally integrating the viewer in this "todos".

are also likely to miss the important aspects of Amanda's story, and we could add that this is not unlikely either for the extrafilmic reality: our contemporary world has become so complex that it seems impossible to consider everything, let alone all the details, and therefore to be able to always separate the important from the negligible. And now, isn't it normal to feel overtaxed and unsure in such a world? Our film seems to pick up exactly this feeling, what becomes particularly visible in a sequence that confronts us for a remarkably long time with the following image that shows Amanda and Carola at the farming complex just before Amanda and her daughter begin to feel gravely sick:



Figure 1 *DISTANCIA DE RESCATE* (2021): Amanda and Carola in a world that exceeds them by far (1:07:20).

This image seems a pertinent expression of a world that exceeds by far the capacities of the two women, a reality that makes them feel small and helpless. In such a situation isn't it only human to try to search for, less complex explanations and structures, ones that are easier to grasp and give us the feeling that we have understood "lo importante"? This longing for a reduction of the world's complexity often experienced as overtaxing, which seems particularly typical of our age,<sup>24</sup> can find a powerful expression in the creation of an unexplainable, cosmic power, that suits so extremely well the genre of the fantastic and is incarnated

24 Cf. Zygmunt Bauman's comment that in our contemporary world with its surplus of possibilities and choices "[t]ime and again we [all] dream of a 'great simplification'" (Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2019, p. 213).

in our movie, as in many other fantastic works, by the possibility of a ubiquitous evil.

Such a use of the supernatural as an antidote to a world that seems so complex we cannot comprehend it anymore points towards a highly interesting evolution of the history of the fantastic: Whereas the fantastic with its constitutive evocation of a supernatural explanation served during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the genre's first main phase, primarily to express a longing to broaden a world that seemed too narrowed by strictly rational positivism,<sup>25</sup> we can nowadays observe the exact opposite: the world seems too broad and too confuse and the fantastic is often used to express a wide-spread wish to reduce this overwhelming complexity. This observation also explains why crisis narratives and the fantastic go together so well, for an important function of crisis narratives is precisely the "Komplexitätsreduktion", as Vera and Ansgar Nünning explain.<sup>26</sup> To reach this goal, these narratives often "implizieren und konstruieren [...] mehr oder weniger stark simplifizierende Deutungen und Erklärungen vergangener Prozesse",<sup>27</sup> what can be done perfectly via the evocation of a possible supernatural explanation, which is an indispensable part of the fantastic.

This thought can be developed further and with that aim we come back to the central image of Amanda's and Carola's encounter in the barn that also reveals an additional dimension of our interpretation: for this frame does not only offer an impressive image of a cosmic loneliness but maybe even more of the loneliness of two mothers that both have lost her children in a certain way (and it cannot be overlooked that it is probably during this encounter between Amanda and Carola that Nina catches the illness which fails to kill her).<sup>28</sup> Both women have to be heavily blamed

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25 Roger Caillois clearly underscores this purpose, when he writes in his famous description (based precisely on the fantastic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) that the fantastic takes place "im Herzen einer bis ins kleinste Detail festgelegten Welt, aus der man das Geheimnisvolle für immer verbannt hatte" (Roger Caillois: "Das Bild des Phantastischen. Vom Märchen bis zur Science Fiction", in: Rein A. Zondergeld (ed.): *Phaicon. Almanach der phantastischen Literatur*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 44–83, here p. 50). The same opinion is put forward by Jaime Alazraki: "En un mundo domesticado por las ciencias, el relato fantástico abre una ventana a las tinieblas del más allá." (Jaime Alazraki: "¿Qué es lo neofantástico?", in: *Mester* 19 (1990), p. 21–33, here p. 25.).

26 Nünning: *Krise als medialer Leitbegriff und kulturelles Erzählmuster*, p. 258.

27 Ibid., p. 259.

28 The mothers' eternal anxiety for their children is, of course, another key subject of this movie, clearly underscored by its title and the explication Amanda gives for the concept of the "distancia de rescate" that dominates her entire life (23:50). The fantastic genre is perfectly suitable to express this never-ending anxiety which can seem absolutely

for their respective loss: Carola for having taken an irrational decision – bringing her ill son to a witch who experiments with him rather than to a real doctor who would have applied a medical treatment – and Amanda for having waited way too long before leaving with Nina a village that obviously is not a suitable place for a little girl.<sup>29</sup> And the film alludes clearly to the obvious dimension of at least Amanda's failure: it is no coincidence that the sequence which inspires this hypothesis is taken in the farming complex, because this farm is later shown as the most probable source of the children's suffering: in the last minutes of her life Amanda recollects important moments of her last days and eventually identifies the water, polluted by agricultural pesticides, as the cause for the seemingly inexplicable events.<sup>30</sup> In such a perspective, the events could be explained

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irrational to a lot of neutral beholders, but on the other hand is an absolutely natural state of mind for a lot of mothers and our movie makes strong use of this.

- 29 In our opinion this is, a lot more than other elements that have been mentioned in recent research, the decisive aspect in the intermedial relationship between Schweblin's and Llosa's movie (as well as in the, in this case intertextual, relationship between the novel on which it is based) and Ira Levine's *The Stepford Wives*. It is not so much the undecidability about what causes the strange events a (female) newcomer witnesses in an environment that had looked inviting in the first place (with polluted water being one probable explanation) that links the two works. In the light of our observations, it is rather the protagonist's all too long hesitation before leaving, when it has already, and for a long time, become clear that her environment is highly dangerous, and potentially deadly. It is no coincidence that Joanna asks herself "if it *was* in time" (Ira Levine: *The Stepford Wives*, London 2011 [1972], p. 124, italics in the original), when she finally tries to flee, because, exactly as Amanda, she knows inside that it is too late, what both works emphasize harshly with their respective endings. So we can conclude that in both cases the fantastic genre serves to illustrate our endless hesitating (highlighting, by the way, another aspect of Todorov's central term in his description of the genre) – we do know that we cannot go on like this, but nevertheless are not able to take resolute action in time.
- 30 It might be of some interest to add that the movie adaptation, far from being unambiguous as we have shown throughout this paper, tends much stronger than the novel towards this rational explanation, the pollution of the water by big agricultural companies. This becomes especially evident in these final moments before Amanda's death, as she recalls all the moments in which Nina and herself have been exposed to the water and the pesticides – a scene that is not in the novel. One might wonder if this "more realistic" tendency, within which the supernatural option is not completely discarded but its probability noticeably reduced, is due to the movie's production context and the (commercial) interests of streaming platforms like Netflix. The recent example of the movie adaptation of Guillermo Martínez' novel *La muerte lenta de Luciana B., La ira de Dios*, which was produced for Netflix as well (in 2022), seems to point in this direction, for in this adaptation the novel's radical undecidability about who or what has caused a series of mysterious deaths is also plainly reduced and a rational explanation is presented as by far the most probable option.

strictly rationally and the other explanation, the supernatural one, would be nothing else than a mere excuse for a wrong decision or a neglect, and above all for closing the eyes in the face of the all too visible. For such an interpretation David's final comment can hardly be overestimated, because when he says to Amanda, who is recollecting her contact with the village's water, "Lo ves, pero no lo entendés" ("You see it, but you don't understand it", 1:19:32), he seems to hint at the possibility that she does not *want* to understand it.

In this respect a comparison is striking to another movie that was released almost at the same time (in December 2021, two months after *Distancia de rescate*): *Don't look up* by Adam McKay, a film where the central complex of seeing or rather not-seeing shows already up in the title. In McKay's film almost nobody draws the necessary consequences although there is irresistible proof for an imminent destruction of the entire earth. Here we find again Amanda's continuous hesitating until it is too late in another, but nevertheless linked, context, not the least because the climate debate, which is the clear subject of *Don't look up*, is, of course, also a central topic of *Distancia de rescate*, a film that focusses explicitly on the environment and its pollution.<sup>31</sup>

With *Don't look up* in mind and coming back to Llosa's and Schweblin's film and the revival of the fantastic in cinema in general, one could ask oneself if the fantastic in recent films does not often serve as a means to approach the – probably very human, but at the same time possibly fatal – reluctance to take serious consequences even if all ratio forces us to act and to search other explanations instead that justify our inactivity, to build up mental constructions which excuse our passivity and make us feel like victims of a higher power we cannot control or dominate.<sup>32</sup>

In such a perspective, the supernatural options within current movies belonging to the fantastic could be seen as mechanisms of evasion at

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31 Here seems to lie an important reason why such fantastic films abound today as it becomes every day clearer that we must act and act *now* in order to save our planet. This also explains the remarkably strong presence of time travel stories on our contemporary screens (in movies and TV series alike): for in these stories, the travel through time is mostly necessary because in the present day or the near future the imperative steps to save the earth have not (or not in time) been taken, so that someone from the future has to come back to our present and make this very clear, so that we finally start to act.

32 As we all know, such a behaviour has been and still is omnipresent within the pandemic, where people reject scientifically proven vaccination because of absurd theories, and within the climate debate, which provides depressing examples of comparable thoughts almost daily.

the diegetic level, but the fantastic as a genre as a sophisticated strategy to unveil such evasive behaviour and therefore a decidedly political, a committed approach.<sup>33</sup> Thanks to this commitment, *Distancia de rescate* follows the great examples of Argentinean fantastic literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the fantastic was never an evasive game, but a serious intent to grasp important aspects of the human condition as prove the works of the quickly mentioned Bioy Casares as well as those of Borges or Cortázar. Samanta Schweblin seems, with her literary works and this first movie, a highly interesting successor of their work in our present.

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33 This proves once again that the often heard prejudice that the fantastic is an evasive genre is not tenable at all; on the contrary, it is a perfect means to unmask evasive behaviour. In the light of our article’s observations the genre proves particularly useful to attack conspiracy theories that have become so wide spread in our contemporary world. For it is the main principle of these conspiracy theories to deny the most obvious facts (like the human-made pollution of the planet, Covid, ...) and insinuate instead dark powers causing the world’s problems, in other words: they illustrate in an exemplary way the reduction of complexity we have treated in this paper (cf. Jonathan Gottschall: *The storytelling animal. How stories make us human*, Boston 2012, p. 111–116).

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