

# “I Can’t Control It”: Lila Avilés’s Feature Films as Environmental Mourning

Kevin Anzzolin  
Christopher Newport University, USA

**Abstract** Climate change has had a profound impact on Mexico. Notably, in 2024, climate scientist Claudia Sheinbaum was elected president. Mexican filmmaker Lila Avilés’s two feature films – *La camarista* (*The Chambermaid*, 2018) and *Tótem* (*Totem*, 2024) – have garnered significant press attention but little scholarly analysis. Through a detailed examination of Avilés’s portrayal of hygiene and animals, the author argues that the films highlight humanity’s interconnectedness with nature and reflect the failed efforts – through religion, psychology, politics, and other means – to control it. In this sense, Avilés films the ‘anthropological machine’ in the making, and these works should be understood as instances of environmental mourning.

**Keywords** Mexico. Cinema. Environmental mourning. Death. Lila Avilés.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: Screening Mexico’s Environmental Apocalypse. – 2 Lila Avilés’s Feature Films and Their Reception. – 3 To Control Nature: Labour, Hygiene, and Arbitrary Classifications. – 4 Conclusions: Environmental Apocalypse and Death in Mexico.



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Learning to die isn't easy.  
 (Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, 21)

## 1 Introduction: Screening Mexico's Environmental Apocalypse

When Europeans first arrived to Mexico City in 1519, they marvelled at what they saw - a place full of flora, fauna, and life. In his letters to Spanish king Carlos V, infamous Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés describes the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán as having the waterways of Venice and the temples of Jerusalem. The city, built on marshlands in a valley, appeared to float atop Lake Texcoco. The ruler of the Aztecs, Moctezuma, kept a vivarium, stocked with exotic animals from throughout his kingdom, and meant to illustrate his wealth, his power, even his sanctity.

Some 400 years later - after decades of mining, drainage, the invention of automobiles and factories - the Valley of Mexico is a dramatically different place. With a population of over 22 million, Mexico City is covered in cement and chokes on polluted air. Lake Texcoco is estimated to have lost 95 percent of its area; some parts of Mexico City are reported to sink 20 inches every year, as some residents live in constant fear of running out of water (Wagner et al. 2024). Today, the Mexican capital faces an ecological apocalypse. Mexico's dire environmental situation has been well-documented (Vallejo 2022; Vitz 2018; Arroyo-Quiroz, Wyatt 2018). Given the imminent environmental dangers facing Mexico City and beyond, it is perhaps telling that in September 2023, Mexico's University of Guadalajara built Latin America's largest environmental sciences museum at a cost of 100 million dollars. Also revealing is that in June 2024 Mexico elected a climate scientist, Claudia Sheinbaum, as president. Of the pressing issues that the 61-year-old scientist-turned-politician will have to deal with are her country's reliance on fossil fuels and its ongoing water crisis.

Mexico's growing awareness of climate-related issues has also been televised and filmed. Notable productions include *Silent River* (2014), *Cuates de Australia: Drought* (2013), *Los hombres del pueblo que no existe* (2015), *El Remolino* (2016), *Resurrección* (2016), *Land and Water Revisited* (2020), and *El Tema* (2021). Recently, various of these offerings have been examined by Carolyn Fornoff (2022). Of these pieces is Lila Avilés's 2016 *La fertilidad de la tierra* (*The Fertility of the Land*), which won Best Documentary at Ecofilm Fest 2016. In recent years, the director has produced narrative films that, at first blush, appear to have very little to do with environmental issues. 2018 saw Avilés direct *La camarista* (*The Chambermaid*), a film

about the monotonous workdays of a young chambermaid in a luxurious Mexico City hotel, while in 2023, Avilés directed *Tótem* (*Totem*), a film about a 7-year-old girl who takes in the emotional instability of her family as it prepares a final birthday party for her moribund father. Although both of these feature films have garnered accolades in the press, scholars have yet to examine them. Furthermore, articles dealing with Lila Avilés's feature films have consistently focused on issues of gender – the fact that Avilés and her protagonists are females. Avilés indeed has a keen vision of gender; but this article takes a different course.

Inspired by both ecocriticism and death studies, I read *La camarista* and *Tótem* allegorically, arguing that the works' characters represent how distinct systems of thought – religion, psychology, politics, etc. – constitute failed attempts to control the natural world. The films parabolize our ecological death and philosophically interrogate the inhumane ways that we deal with others, especially knowing that earth's death is imminent. In this way, Avilés's art is understood as an example of environmental mourning.<sup>1</sup> Avilés's feature films are meditations on our ambivalent relationship to the natural world even as we learn to die alongside it. Furthermore, I activate a key concept found in chapter 9 of Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal*, in which the Italian philosopher describes humanity as constantly producing an "anthropological machine" – that is, a means of illustrating the dichotomy between human and animals. Here, 'Openness' is crucial for Agamben, as he understands our ways of experiencing the world as different from that of animals.

I conclude the article with a nod to scholars Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, who argue that environmental grief varies among different geographical locations, cultures and communities; I speculate how Avilés's appraisal of environmental mourning is uniquely Mexican.

## 2 Lila Avilés's Feature Films and Their Reception

Beyond her two feature films, Lila Avilés (born 1982) has directed documentaries, such as *Nena* (2017) and *The Fertility of the Land* (2016), as well as shorts, like 2016's *Déjà vu* and *Dos ojos veces boca* (*Eye Two Times Mouth*), from 2023. With *The Chambermaid* and *Totem*, Avilés's stature has significantly and justifiably grown. Yet, scholarship on her work has not kept pace with her renown. Before examining Avilés's works, contemplating them vis-à-vis ecocriticism

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<sup>1</sup> See Morton 2007; Lertzman 2015; Scranton 2015; Buhner 2022; Merchant 1980, among others.

and thanatological studies, a brief summary of both the films' – along with their respective reviews – is necessary.

*The Chambermaid* premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2018 before being screened at over eighty other international festivals that same year. Having garnered significant acclaim, the film went on to represent Mexico at the Oscars and at the Goya Awards in 2020. The film recounts the story of Eve, a 24-year-old housekeeper working at Mexico City's luxurious Hotel Presidente Intercontinental, where she spends her days meticulously cleaning the rooms of the hotel's affluent and rather picky guests. The film is slow-moving with scant dialogue, paying close attention to angles and moods; the entirety of the movie is shot within the hotel, its elevators, its rooms, its utility closets, thus giving the film a claustrophobic setting that emphasises the smallness of Eve's professional and personal life. Only the hotel's windows provide evidence of the metropolis beyond. Significantly, the film ends just as Eve is walking through the luxurious hotel lobby and toward the exit. For Eve and for viewers, the hotel is, effectively, where the film begins and ends. If we were to understand the film's setting as a type of ecological trope, the hotel is, like the earth itself, our forever home: there is no exit from what happens here in terms of labour or in terms of how we treat each other.

The camera hones in on Eve's attention to detail: the meticulous ways she cleans lampshades, bathtubs, and bedsheets. There is a disconnect between the seriousness with which Eve performs her duties as a maid and the detachment, even disdain, that guests show toward her. Eve is charged with scrubbing heavy stains from the bathtub in a room where an unnamed, rather demanding businessman-type is staying. Another guest, an Argentine mother named Romy, treats Eve well, but perhaps only to task the maid with babysitting (Romy's) infant. The guest will abandon the hotel abruptly, leaving Eve wondering where the young mother has gone. Amid Eve's constant cleaning, the tiring labour of a maid, her days are enlivened by two bright spots: a possible promotion and an opportunity to win, via an internal lottery, a red dress left behind by one of the guests. Eve also befriends a fellow housekeeper, Minitoy, whom she first meets in the hotel management's adult education programs. This relationship sours when Minitoy wins the position to care for the hotel's prestigious 42th floor, a promotion Eve had wanted. Minitoy's unique name also should not be ignored: is she, a housekeeper, but a plaything for wealthy hotel guests?

As noted above, critical attention to *The Chambermaid* has been very positive. Given the film's focus on the wearying professional life of a domestic labourer, and given that Avilés's work was released a mere two months before Alfonso Cuarón's renowned *Roma*, numerous reviews of *The Chambermaid* address Avilés's depiction of the workplace, and the plight of the protagonist, Eve. Thus, *Variety*

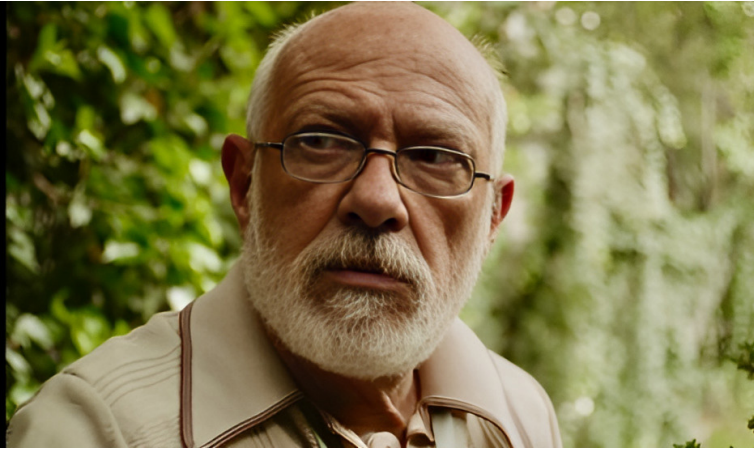
characterises the film as a 'complement' to *Roma* while *Remezcla* provides the necessary corrective: "While both films share connective tissue... they are completely different films".<sup>2</sup> Others have compared *The Chambermaid* to a long line of films dealing with servanthood and labour practices, particularly when servanthood is becoming contractual work in Latin America and when the region is experiencing "changing attitudes toward the ethics of hiring a live-in domestic worker, particularly among sectors of the Left" (Randall 2024, 139).<sup>3</sup> Somewhat less compelling are pieces that emphasise Avilés's gender and her inclusion of female protagonists – as if women have not done formidable work in the cinematic profession.<sup>4</sup> Yet, reviews fail to mention Avilés's film as concerned with environmental issues and, specifically, environmental mourning. Admittedly, the work's ecological messaging is muted and its truths are symbolic rather than literal. Ultimately, without knowledge of Avilés's more explicitly environmentalist films like 2016's *Fertility of the Land* and 2023's *Tótem*, the true message of *The Chambermaid* is occluded.

*Tótem* aids viewers in seeing the environmentally conscious messaging of Avilés's previous work – Avilés's primary concern as to how we mourn a dying planet – and helps in drawing together a constellation of themes and tropes central to the director. With *Tótem*, the allegorical language evinced by Avilés is less disguised. Still, this film's environmentalist message has also been ignored by critics; academic scholarship of the film remains nil, perhaps on account of the film's recent release. Thus, *NPR* praises Avilés's film as "even more touching vision of Mexican family life than you got in Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*" (Powers 2024). *The Independent* correctly signals the film's employment of a child-like gaze and wonders whether the protagonist, Sol, is being protected or distracted from the "crushing calamity" that her father's imminent death represents (Coyle 2024). More compellingly, *The New York Times* signals that *Tótem* and *The Chambermaid* deal with similar issues and refers to Avilés's previous *The Chambermaid* as "set in a hotel... another ecosystem" (Dargis 2024). However, the review sidesteps any type of ecocritical perspective on the films: the fact that 'ecology' originates from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'house' or 'environment'. The term denotes the study of how organisms interact with their surroundings and focuses on understanding the relationships between organisms and their habitats. *Tótem*, like *The Chambermaid*, explores how beings interact with each other, even as the entire lifeworld they inhabit dies. Most welcome is Peyton Robinson's review, which

<sup>2</sup> See Debruge 2019; Martínez 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Also see Betancourt 2020; Skvirsky 2020; Emmelhainz 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See Patiño 2024 for this focus on gender.



**Figure 1** Roberto, the psychologist grandfather. Lila Avilés, *Tótem*. 2023. Credit @Limerencia Films. Courtesy of Alpha Violet Films

explains the film's 'animal motif' as a "reminder of nature's dominance" (Robinson 2024).

*Tótem* won the Ecumenical Award at the Berlin Film Festival, among numerous other awards, before becoming Mexico's submission for the Best International Feature at the 96th Academy Awards. In September 2024, it won Best Picture at Mexico's Ariel Awards. Similar to *The Chambermaid*, the film closely follows the perspective of its reserved, young and female protagonist. In the case of *Tótem*, Sol is a curious 7-year-old who is extremely attracted to insects and small animals - praying mantises, snails, parrots - and which she encounters throughout her grandfather's house. It is here that Avilés's second film will take place; similar to *The Chambermaid*, the film is set in a single location which provides a rather closed ambience.

The film opens with Sol and her mother, Lucía, sharing a public restroom, the two giggling through Sol's failed attempt to urinate. Sol is at an awkward stage of childhood, and finds herself unable to control her bodily movements. Ultimately, she cannot urinate, forcing Lucía to relieve herself in the sink; both laugh during the moment of tender taboo. The two continue on to a birthday party for Sol's terminally ill father, Tona, a well-known artist dying of cancer. There is a subtle acknowledgement that the event may also double as a farewell party. As Sol ambles through the middle-class house, the camera almost always close by, we witness the chaos within a family as they hurriedly arrange Tona's party and put up a good front for the dying artist.

Amid the frantic preparation, we meet Sol's grandfather, Roberto, a psychologist who receives patients at home. He bears a striking resemblance to Sigmund Freud - a thinker who, in his own right, explored the construction of civilization as well as the processes of mourning [fig. 1]. In hushed tones, the family debates whether Tona should receive another session of chemotherapy. One of Sol's aunts, Nuri, struggles to bake a cake as she sadly drinks herself into a stupor. Another aunt, Alejandra, dyes her hair between cigarettes. She invites a psychic into the house to vanquish any bad vibes from the residence and thus help Tona recover. Another family member, Uncle Octavo, leads an equally desperate attempt to cure Tona via a meditation session focused on capturing the ill artist's 'quantum energy'. Meanwhile, in a darkened back bedroom, an at-home nurse, Cruz, helps the skeletal Tona look presentable for the festivities. Although the trench coat he puts on to hide the effects of cancer is unconvincing, he puts up a brave face for the party, where he is lovingly celebrated by his bohemian and intellectual friends. The film ends with Sol and Lucía lip-synching an operatic aria. The concluding shot shows Tona's empty bed, the wind blowing into the room where he has ostensibly passed on. Neither spiritualism, psychology, or science could stop nature's toll.

### 3 To Control Nature: Labour, Hygiene, and Arbitrary Classifications

Both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* constantly focus on labour, personal hygiene, and the natural world. Avilés's films examine how we treat each other and the meaning and value we put on transforming our environments, even while we mourn the fact that our actions - our incomplete yet profound interventions in nature - have cast doubt on humanity's survival. Both films query how to forge non-alienating and non-abusive communities. How to create collectives not only among humans - families, places of business, among our 'totems' - but also across multiple species? As previously noted, although *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* are not, at first blush, as ecologically focused as Avilés's earlier *The Fertility of the Land*, they also allegorize environmental mourning and the constant construction of the 'anthropological machine'. This is especially true given that

[t]he idea of the environment is more or less a way of considering groups and collectives - humans surrounded by nature, or in continuity with other beings such as animals and plants. It is about being-with. (Morton 2007, 17)

In this way, it is incisive to see Avilés's films in line with the way Agamben 'anthropological machine', a mechanism that constructs the

human identity in relation to and in contrast with the animal: "*Homo sapiens*, then, is neither a clearly defined species nor substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing recognition of the human" (2004, 26). Often, the means humanity employs to control the natural world and thereby classify beings as kin or not-kin, natural or unnatural, worthy or unworthy of mourning is arbitrary: such is what makes it people possible to mourn, say, the loss of a family dog yet not the passing of a (human) neighbour.<sup>5</sup> That is, there are both companion animals and animals for consumption; there are weeds and there are plants; there are admired irregularities within nature (say, long eyelashes) and others that are unwanted (warts, cancers). To delimit our communities, we employ schools of thought, disciplines, and control mechanisms – we treat others and nature in arbitrary, illogical, and hurtful ways. All told, our efforts come to ruin our different ecosystems.

Biologists and historians of science have, like ecocritical theorists, interrogated humanity's relationship to the natural world, how we mark our differences from animal life, and how we approach cleanliness; the so-called anthropological machine is indebted to notions of hygiene – ideas that scholars across disciplines have examined (Smith 2007; Horan, Frazier 1998; Ward 2019). Katherine Ashenburg proposes, "[c]limate, religion and attitudes to privacy and individuality also affect the way we clean ourselves" (2008, 10). How we clean ourselves and how we clean (or fail to clean) our environment is related to how we build civilizations against nature. Ecologically speaking, everything is connected: our time spent in the shower, our grooming products, or the amount of trash we create have real, macro-level and multispecies consequences. Psychology and emotions, too, are at the centre of our hygienic practices, our ecological concerns, our understanding of the animal world. Thus, Morton notes

ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power-and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. (2007, 2)

Effectively, there is no 'outside' of ecology – each of our everyday actions is consequential. Yet, humans remain driven to development, to invent, and unfortunately, destruction: our "fantasy is a world of absolute control and order" (83). Both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem* examine this conflux of issues.

*The Chambermaid* is, as the film's title and summary above suggest, profoundly interested in our hygiene: how we discipline our

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<sup>5</sup> Braun (2013, 68) explores this line of thinking: "that the distinction between the dog as person (in the family) and as pet (outside the family)".



urges, and how, in Foucauldian terms, socioeconomic relations are biopolitical in character. With Avilés's first feature film, *Eve* is constantly cleaning – after all, it is her job in the luxurious Mexico City hotel; unique for *Eve*, however, is the fact that hygiene mediates her social relations, her sense of labour and of self, her humanity. *Eve*'s prowess as housekeeper is significant – even neurotic: she uses a toothbrush to scour a telephone's number buttons, a rag to literally whip the dust off of lampshades, and is tasked to scrub the bathtub that seems to have been left bloodied or defecated on by a guest. The stain is so significant that viewers are left wondering what the guest could possibly have been doing.

Issues of fairness, of taboos, and neuroses emerge as characters clean themselves, groom themselves, and disinfect their spaces; viewers see the anthropological machine being developed in small ways – vignettes, really – that provide the motor for Avilés's plotlines.

Acts of cleaning abound in Avilés's films. Thus, in both *The Chambermaid* and *Tótem*, we see characters realise risky, gravity-defying cleaning feats while others look on. With *The Chambermaid*, a repeated vignette involves a handsome window cleaner who, while *Eve* cleans hotel rooms, is hanging from the scaffolding outside. He completes his tasks, even as he uses a squeegee to draw heart shapes, hoping to attract *Eve*. *Tótem* includes a similar trope while preparations for Tona's party are underway. Nuri is in the kitchen, taking sips from a healthy pour of whisky – how she copes with her family's drama and her brother's moribund state. Her 4-year-old daughter, Esther, is balancing on top of the refrigerator, holding the family cat, Monsi. A bit glassy-eyed from the drink, Nuri fiddles around the kitchen before asking her daughter: "Do you want to wipe up there?" (13'33").<sup>6</sup> The balancing act, like that of the window washer, in no way feels safe for such a young child. Esther requests, quite reasonably, that her mother take care of Monsi while she cleans. Nuri takes Monsi in one arm while continuing to cradle her tumbler of alcohol. We push back on our status as animals, crafting civilization via hygiene, and thereby cultivating the anthropological machine – yet ask others to do the heavy lifting. Later on, as preparations for the party continue, Alejandra scolds her children for being unable to properly use a vacuum (39'44"). Effectively, via the labour needed to clean ourselves, we perpetuate the anthropological machine; power relationships – telling others what to do – are constant.

*The Chambermaid* thus narrates the biopolitical character of civilization, where biological selves are governed in disparate ways: both humans and animals are afforded liberties unequally. For example, early on in the film, *Eve* receives notice that a guest has requested

6 "Deja cuatro a seis de las chiquitas".

more amenities (mini bottles of shampoo, soap, mouthwash). Her rapid response suggests how seriously she understands her job: she takes great care, while guests merely take advantage of her. When she arrives at the guest's room, she finds a chubby, professional male fresh from the shower, dressed in a terry cloth bathrobe. He stares at the television while cleaning his ears with cotton swabs; he does not even look toward Eve, or really acknowledge her existence. He nods toward the bathroom. Only when she is there, off-screen, does he call out to her: "Leave four to six of the small ones".<sup>7</sup> When she reappears in the bedroom less than a minute later (17'00"), she asks if he needs anything else.<sup>8</sup> He does not reply. Intriguingly, this shadowy figure is crucial in terms of the film's meaning and message. During this scene, the man is watching a televised conversation about poststructuralist thought. Off-screen, we hear one of the televised interlocutors quote from philosopher Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel – a passage, interestingly, that Agamben, too, paraphrases when discussing the post-human:

and it is not a biological catastrophe either: Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so called – that is, Action negating the given and Error, or, in general, the Subject opposed to the Object. (2003, 5-6)

Ironically, the obese hotel guest, who dehumanises Eve's labour by charging her to perform all tasks related to his personal hygiene, watches a television program that details an optimistic response to post-human reality. Perhaps we have returned to an animal state, stupidly staring at television in a luxury hotel. In a subsequent scene with the same guest, Eve cleans on the right side of the room, the man seated on his bed at left (35'11"). He abrasively requests more toilet paper.<sup>9</sup> Wearing a headset, he dictates into his computer strange scientific talk about how the fittest survive, the number of females needed in a species, and the strongest males in a group.<sup>10</sup> Although it is unclear as to the origin of the passage, it explores the same concepts of a Charles Darwin or a Richard Dawkins. How do groups survive? Who dictates who cleans up after whom in a community? Is it just – even biologically determined – that some watch television while

<sup>7</sup> "¿Necesita algo más?".

<sup>8</sup> "Quiero más papel de baño".

<sup>9</sup> "Para entender lo que es supone ser sobreviviente, tenemos que regresar a cada historia de éxito y seguir en la manada nacen igual número de hembras que de machos. Impera la ley de la más fuerte. Pero para los grandes machos la clave está en la superioridad numérica".

<sup>10</sup> "Me puede apachurrar el botón por favor? Es que es Shabbaz".

others wash up after them? To what extent is it innately human to engage in cooperative behaviour? Avilés interrogates our condition as humans and, moreover, our status within the larger environment. To what extent are homo sapiens able to think and plan collectively in a non-alienating, benevolent ways? To what extent is multispecies thinking possible? Who will survive the crisis of the Anthropocene?

The intersection of humanity, the non-human, labour, and hygiene is explored in other scenes in *The Chambermaid* and other characters in Eve's orbit. Cleanliness and work provide a social context by which to gauge one's worth, one's humanity – or supposed lack thereof. Thus, when Eve misses a heavy blood stain on a guest's bedsheets, she begs her colleague, Minitoy for help (44'09"). Minitoy, seemingly in a show of goodwill, removes the tough stain; only at the end of the film will Minitoy gain the upper hand, beating out Eve for promotion within the hotel. In another scene, Tita, who works in the hotel laundry room, tells Eve that the housekeeper has "beat-up" hands, only to then try and sell Eve a curative lotion (19'04"). Perhaps the most striking example of how hotel guests effectively animalize hotel employees – the unfair labour practices, the deeply biopolitical character of society, the unequal access to cleanliness and creature comforts – is seen when a Jewish guest requests that Eve press the elevator button (1:06'17"). As he explains, responding to her questioning glances: "It's Shabbat".<sup>11</sup> With this, we see an imperfect adherence to what Agamben proposed to overcome the anthropological machine: a "'Shabbat' of both man and animal" that would interrogate the place of humanity vis-à-vis the animal world.<sup>12</sup> How can we rethink the world in a way that does not make some humans little more than beasts of burden of others?

Another hotel guest, an Argentine woman named Romy, summons Eve to enter her suite having recently nursed her new-born; Romy wipes drops of milk from her breast, unashamed of her nudity – perhaps due to Eve's lowly status as a housekeeper (22:00'12"). The Argentine, stressed during her business trip and alone with an infant, asks Eve for babysitting help while she (Romy) takes a much-needed shower. A few minutes later, we learn that Eve is not afforded such luxuries of hygiene.<sup>13</sup> At home, the housekeeper does not have access to a shower but instead washes herself with buckets of water (27'40").

<sup>11</sup> "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean... to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man" (Agamben Kishik, Pedatella 2011, 92).

<sup>12</sup> "Allá tengo que bañar a jicaradas".

<sup>13</sup> "No sé qué tiene esta ciudad que la garganta la tengo fatal... la piel, una lija ... el pelo asqueroso... no sé te juro que debe ser algo del aire, del agua".

The guest will later ask that Eve watch the child multiple days. Effectively, Romy does not take into consideration that babysitting is not Eve's job. Romy essentially buys access to Eve's body with no real sense that Eve should be able to offer and retract her productive facilities. The different social realms these respective characters inhabit is emphasised when discussing how to get around in Mexico City. Romy seems sceptical of using the Mexico City subway system that Eve uses daily, even as she is intrigued by the fact that the housekeeper does not shave her legs (49'04").

Before Romy leaves the hotel, not having provided Eve with any notice or wishing her goodbye, we see Eve in the hotel's bedroom where she changes the infant's diaper. We hear Romy gargling, off camera in the bathroom (55'43"). The worlds of the two women could not be more different: they are divided by class, professions, and access to healthy, eco-friendly living. Romy appears from the bathroom complaining about Mexico City's air and water quality:

I don't know what is up with this city. My throat is in horrible shape. My skin feels like sandpaper... my hair is gross. I swear, it's got to be something in the air or something in the water.

Eve, the lowly housekeeper whose job it is to remain silent, who does not enjoy the same creature comforts that her guests do, but who has also seen things that they have not, says nothing.<sup>14</sup> Thus Avilés represents the biopolitical unfairness of our society: the arbitrariness with which resources, comforts, and hygiene is distributed. In *Tótem*, one of the party's guests, Uncle Napo explains that he spent four hours travelling Mexico City to procure the organic foodstuffs for Tona (50'20"). It is a sign of love, but is also symptomatic of inequalities.

With *Tótem*, Avilés remains concerned with access to hygiene but, given that narration takes place in a single, middle-class family, she also interrogates the moral codes associated with thinking hygienically. Various scenes in *Tótem* undermine our rationality while erecting our anthropological machine. Why should we feel ashamed of our nakedness? Is there worth in modesty? How does disassembling our animality via deodorants, perfumes, and hygiene constitute an illogical continuance of the anthropological machine? Why do we hide humanity's status as animal - all of our grossness, foulness, and uncleanliness? Case and point is when Nuri's daughter, Esther, grabs a menstruation cup while mom readies herself for Tona's party (16'10"). Grabbing a menstruation cup, Esther asks her mother if it can be used to drink wine. Nuri replies: "Not exactly. No, honey. You can't drink

<sup>14</sup> Scholarship on the arbitrariness of our moral codes vis-à-vis animals is ample. For example, see Joy 2011; Adams 2015; Scully 2002, among others.

wine out of it" (16'15"). This arbitrary character of the distinctions we make between natural and unnatural, between human and animal - ultimately, worthy and unworthy - has garnered a significant amount of scholarship, especially in terms of animal studies and multispecies studies.<sup>15</sup> The film points up how we shield children from our status as animals and thus continue the anthropological machine.

Avilés's second feature film also begins with two revealing scenes. The first has already been alluded to above: we see Sol and her mother, Lucía, in a public restroom, singing and laughing together as Sol struggles to urinate. Lucía asks if Sol has finished urinating. When the child answers in the negative, Lucía explains she cannot wait. With Sol still on the toilet, Lucía pees into the sink: "I couldn't hold it anymore" (2'21"). A few seconds later, we hear banging on the bathroom door and the booming voice of an adult woman: "This is a public bathroom! Get out!" (3'13"). With this, taboos are broken, and the distinctions we make in order to maintain the façade of an anthropological machine, are questioned. The scene immediately following situates viewers in the house of the family's patriarch, the elderly Roberto. There, the bearded senior citizen is seen in deep concentration as he prunes a beautiful tabletop-sized bonsai tree (5'50"). In the silence of his garden, the wizened character appears wrapped in thought as he meticulously works on the plant. This is his attempt to control nature - pruning away the unwanted parts, making distinctions as to what parts of ecology are worth saving and what are not. Suddenly, a dark bird flaps into the camera frame, close to Roberto's head and causing him to duck. As the bird cackles in the distance, the old man frowns at the flying animal. Later on, the bird will again approach the gardener while he prunes; this time, Roberto will be better prepared, and he scares the animal off with a broom (47'16"). Our arbitrary or even illogical classifications of nature (What plants and animals are pests?) are also emphasised when Uncle Napo gives Esther a goldfish as a gift. The child contemplates what name best fits the animal: Shark? Dog? Eventually, she decides on "Nugget" as in "Nugget with ketchup" (42'35"). Wise beyond her years, Esther explains that fish are aware of earthquakes before humans, since the animals "feel the vibrations... although they have small brains they're very clever" (42'40"). Children, even in their innocence, understand that animals are, at times, more intelligent than humans; furthermore, they are more susceptible to catastrophic events.

*The Chambermaid* and especially *Tótem* thus allegorize our constant and often futile attempts to create 'the human' and control the natural world via different systems of thought - whether those be religion, psychology, education, science, or politics. Thus, in the former

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15 "Si el Spiderman es un superhéroe".

film, we see Eve's endless battle against dirt via cleaning products, hand creams, and stain removers. We see the Jewish guest unable to work due to his religious belief; and we see students unable to better their lives via adult education classes. As Eve's colleague, Minitoy, jokingly asks when her teacher wonders during class time if there are any questions: "Is Spiderman a Superhero?" (1:05'23").<sup>16</sup> Simply said, what does it mean to be human, animal, or even something beyond – how can we control our experience in order to get there? In *Tótem*, attempts are made in hopes of controlling one of nature's uncontrollable elements – cancer, the disease afflicting Tona. Thus, Uncle Napo holds a séance-type session before Tona's celebration in hopes of abating the guest of honour's constant pain (50'30"). Tona's siblings debate whether Tona should receive further chemotherapy or rather, if he should be provided morphine to dull the pain. Sol's great aunt Alejandra turns to spiritualism to save Tona, even inviting a clairvoyant into the house in order to rid it of bad vibes. As the psychic marches through the house, supposedly vanquishing spirits with a burning piece of bread on a stick, Grandfather Roberto, the practising psychologist yells out "You'll burn down my office. I'm not in the mood for your satanic bullshit" (27'39"). But neither Napo's séance, nor Alejandra's spiritualism, nor even Roberto's science – psychology, his particular discipline evinced to control nature – works. Tellingly, we overhear a patient, almost overcome with emotion, explaining to the elderly psychologist how she had enjoyed the best sex of her life when she cheated on her boyfriend. Intriguingly, the patient situates her experience in terms of inheritance; perhaps generational trauma or Lamarckian evolution, she wonders what she will pass on to her child: "I don't want to pass this on to my baby. I don't want him to unconsciously absorb all this shit that I'm doing" (19'41"). As noted above, Roberto, with his white beard and bald head, could be a doppelgänger for the master psychologist himself, Sigmund Freud (Bunbury 2023). Roberto speaks through an electrolarynx, perhaps an allusion to the fact that Freud, the consummate smoker, had his jaw removed. Ultimately, Roberto's patient, between sobs, expresses her sense of futility against her animal impulses: "I can't control it!" (19'45"). Detaining the push of nature is impossible, even for a school of thought as formidable as Freud's. Worth meaning, too, is the fact that Freudian psychology has long captured the attention of Mexico's intellectual elites, with figures such as José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, and Frida Kahlo turning to Freudian analysis to understand the Mexican national character during the twentieth century.

Avilés will also jokingly nod to other intellectual behemoths of Mexican culture in later scenes in *Tótem*; here, politics and cultural

<sup>16</sup> In De la Fuente 2023, Avilés explains that the title is open to interpretation.



**Figure 2** Tona's former art professor. Lila Avilés, *Tótem*. 2023.  
Credit @Limerencia Films. Courtesy of Alpha Violet Films

myths are queried as systems of thought capable of transforming the human experience. During Tona's party, one of his old art teachers gives a speech in honour of his former student. Beyond lauding Tona as his best student, the teacher rambles on about colonial history, Aztec myths, and critical pedagogy; he is ultimately cut off. Of special note are two elements of his speech. First, he explains how his student's name, Tona, is short for Tonatiuh - the Aztec god of the sun (1:08'05"). With Tona's death, a 'sun' is dying; with him disappears an entire ecosystem that is the family household. Second is the fact that the teacher is a dead ringer for José Revueltas, the bespeckled and goateed writer and political activist who was a prominent member of the Mexican Left during the twentieth century [fig. 2]. The teacher's homage to Tona - replete with Aztec mythology, vile conquistadors, and a touch of decolonial thought - employs many conceits of the cultural nationalism of Mexico's twentieth century. In terms of appearance and message, Tona's old teacher epitomises the ideals of José Revueltas. As it has been recently argued, it may be in human nature to control nature (Tighe 2023). However, *Tótem* suggests that all these attempts ultimately ring hollow. Tona will die.

#### 4 Conclusions: Environmental Apocalypse and Death in Mexico

Unable to control nature yet illogically feeding the flames of the anthropological machine, the Anthropocene constitutes a death knell for humanity. Both of Lila Avilés's feature films allegorize our environmental mourning as the earth dies. First, we should detail some concluding points about *Tótem*, the more obvious rumination on ecological grief.

*Tótem's* Tona dies at the film's end; with the film's last shot, the camera eerily stares at the father figure's empty bed. The centre of the universe for this family - this ecosystem - has perished. Pertinent, too, is the name of Tona's troubled daughter, Sol, whose name in Spanish means 'sun'. As mentioned above, throughout the film she manifests a marked predilection for insects of all sorts, a point that the director has noted in interviews (Frumkin 2024). Sol evinces an infantile phase in which children are working out different types of totems - models of community that may include multiple species (Morris 1967, 171). She may symbolise a different 'sun'. Perhaps Sol is mourning for her father, the dying 'sun', even as she grieves for a non-human family - her beloved insects. In this way, the film's title is not ambiguous: Avilés's production explores how we forge our communities, both human and non-human.<sup>17</sup>

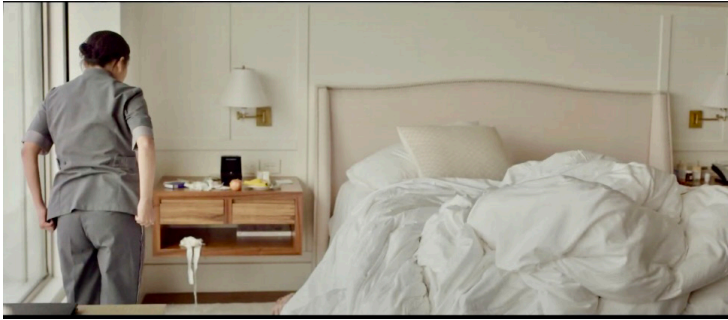
Sol's name also plays on the notion of 'solastalgia', defined as

the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). (Albrecht 2005, 45; Buhner 2022, 29)

She inhabits just such environmental mourning. Appropriately, just before Tona makes a strained entrance to his celebration, we see him and Sol share a tender moment alone together in which he gives her a painting that he, an artist, created: "It's still wet. It's fresh paint. It has all of your favourite animals" (56'50"). In this sense, Sol - although in constant mourning for what is, in fact, an apocalyptic fait accompli - embodies the bittersweet hope that a dying, multispecies world may at least be archived, remembered, and celebrated. As Joshua Barnett explains, phenology is the name for these "entwined practices of observation and documentation, witnessing and archiving... the goings-on of plants and animals, of habitats and ecosystems, of weather and climate" (2022, 71-2). Sol, like Avilés herself, may also be a documentarian. Finally, we should remember that ecological

<sup>17</sup> For Latino grief, see the article from Falzarano et al. 2022. For familismo, see Hernández 2024.





**Figure 3** Eve finds a body while cleaning. Lila Avilés, *La Camarista*. 2019. Credit @Limerencia Films. Courtesy of Alpha Violet Films

grief is experienced differently by individuals, cultures, and communities (Cunsolo, Ellis 2018). Finally, that Tona's 'going-away' party is simultaneously a revelry and a family affair may be particular to the Mexican context - a culture where grieving often involves a celebration of life and in which *familismo* is a touchstone concept.<sup>18</sup>

Reading the *The Chambermaid* as an example of environmental mourning may still appear a specious argument. Although characters mention Mexico City's polluted air and water, and although we can only imagine the kind of harsh chemicals our housekeeper protagonist, Eve, uses to clean the luxury hotel, the film is seemingly absent of death. It is apparent that the hotel's ecosystem is, in a sense, moribund - a close locale characterised by strained social relations and futile attempts to tamp down our animality. Yet, we wonder: are death and mourning at the centre of Avilés's first feature?

Although unnoticed by critics, the final cut of *The Chambermaid* includes a noteworthy difference from the trailer. Avilés's finished product opens with a scene characterised by dark humour that, if we were to see the trailer,<sup>19</sup> was originally nothing short of deathly. In the first shots of *The Chambermaid*, Eve moves around a hotel room, gathering up the rumpled sheets off the bed to launder them. The room is in disarray. As she moves around the bed, she stops, perturbed by what she sees. She bends down to look at something on the floor. Silence. Finally, the head of an elderly pops up; he appears to be upwards of 80 years old. "Good day?" Eve asks (3'50").<sup>20</sup> Although Eve will offer

<sup>18</sup> "¿Buenos días?"

<sup>19</sup> *La Camarista*'s trailer is available at: <https://archive.org/details/la-camarista-trailer-oficial-hd/La+Camarista+-Trailer+Oficial+HD.mp4>.

<sup>20</sup> "Un muerto en la habitación 54".

her help multiple times, the elderly man, seen naked save for a pair of pyjama pants, refuses all conversation. Is he stupefied from slumber? Is he recovering from a fall or a heart attack? Or, is he simply another rude guest? Eve offers to keep cleaning but, given the man's absolute silence, politely tells him that she will return later. If we dare think in terms of Avilés's metaphorical cosmos, the opening scene intimates that senility, accident – indeed, even death – are the defining characteristics of the hotel.

Intriguingly, the film's trailer shows that even deadlier plot twists were left on the proverbial cutting-run floor. The screen flashes to Eve first encountering the old man [fig. 3]. Off-screen, her voice is heard describing "a dead man in room 54" (00:08").<sup>21</sup> This death is never mentioned in *The Chambermaid*'s final cut. Instead, Lazarus-like, the decrepit man rises up from the floor and precedes to ignore Eve. This half-dead man – perhaps originally scripted as a corpse – is the emotional inception of Avilés's film. He foretells the fact that our ecosystems – whether hotels, families, or whole planets – are dying. Avilés's films allegorically examine the ways that we grieve our moribund earth.

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<sup>21</sup> *Tótem* provides English subtitles but *The Chambermaid* is without English translations; thus, the translations for Avilés's former film are by the Author.

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