

AMBIGUITY OF THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE IN CLAUDIA LLOSA'S *THE MILK OF SORROW*

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ABSTRACT

Claudia Llosa's seminal work *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La Teta Asustada*) is a Peruvian feature from 2009 that has been widely analysed and scrutinized. It deals with very intriguing topic of trauma and self-inflicted oppression of a young indigenous woman in contemporary Peru. The task in this research was to elaborate and display how the personal trauma of the female, a victim of rape committed by the Peruvian guerrilla and paramilitary is transmitted onto her daughter and what are the consequences of that transmission. Another goal was to show case how the narrative structure of the film is overlapped by psychological narration unspoken in film, but evident to the viewer through the over amplified presence of the symbolism and through the protagonist's inner state of mind. The narrative is built upon an indigenous belief that the evil of the rapist transmits through mother's milk and that it can only be understood when a subject becomes aware of its own pre-traumatizing experience. This is exemplified by iconological and symbolic usage of the potato, which the protagonist Fausta inserts into her vagina. She does so in order to shield herself from the transmitting of the evil, but the potato inevitably becomes a trigger/safety of her traumatizing existence. The real narrative is thus border by the potato insertion and finally by the potato being removed from the protagonist's genitals. Frame and montage analysis of the strategies employed by Llosa reveals that the visual and symbolic content of *The Milk of Sorrow* narrates the trauma in the unique way that has influenced feminist filmmakers in the Latin America to approach the taboo topics like rape and incest from different perspectives. At the same time, the trauma narrative produces ambiguity that has led the scholars to complete opposition in their analysis, and precisely this ambiguity is the *raison d'être* of this research.

KEY WORDS

iconology, rape, trauma, transmission, symbolism

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

The films of Claudia Llosa have been very influential in the Latin America; especially concerning the breakthrough Golden Bear at 2009 Berlin film festival for *The Milk of Sorrow*, which opened a space for a wide array of feminist and activist filmmakers in the region. Her first feature *Madeinusa* from 2007 aroused quite a controversy within the critics circle but also within the mixed and indigenous communities in Peru. It represented a fictive indigenous community called Manayaycuna in which the father aims towards incestuous relationship with his adolescent daughter while the daughter aims to escape the indigenous oppression towards urban Lima. The rituals, ceremonies and the indigenous traditions (although fictive) are displayed as corrupted, oppressive, backward and paternalistic. This awkwardness in representing the negative aspects of rituals is uncommon in Latin American cinema, but not unheard of since Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha made the film *Barravento* in 1962. The narrative structure of *Barravento* does not resemble the one in *Madeinusa*, but the context in which the traditional *candomblé*¹ ritual of Bahia represents a backward and regressive oppression towards free-will individual is similar to the one represented in *Madeinusa*. The eponymous character in first Llosa's film is forced to be initiated through the ritual of *Virgen dolorosa*² – the Virgin/child only to be more eligible for the premeditated rape craved by her father. Both Rocha and Llosa were heavily criticized for their debuts on the behalf of negative ethnography representation apparent in both films.

Almost in a way of liberating herself from the guilt of neo-colonial accusations aroused with *Madeinusa*, Llosa's subsequent film *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*) from 2009 reverses the context in almost every way. The protagonist of the film, Quechan indigenous young woman Fausta is trying to escape from her mother's oppressive memories of the Peruvian *Internal conflict* whilst living in the migrant *chabola* (shanty-town) in the suburb of Lima. While in *Madeinusa* the eponymous character cunningly emancipates itself by poisoning her incestuous father with rat poison and blaming her *gringo/white lover* for it, Fausta in *The Milk of Sorrow* places the potato into her vagina in order to protect herself from the possible rape and desecration by the males around her. She does so in concordance with the indigenous belief that the evil spirit of the perpetrator transmits through the mother's milk. Since Fausta's mother was a victim of the multiply rape performed by the members of the Peruvian paramilitary guerrilla *Sendero luminoso*, Fausta consciously convinces (but arbitrary to some extent) herself that the same would happen to her. Hence, the potato in vagina acts as a trigger for her traumatized existence in the fear of the rape. At the same time, she believes that potato is a safety that can prevent the premeditated rape and that it binds her to the memory of her dead mother [1; p.302].

Curious link between *Madeinusa* and *The Milk of Sorrow* does not end only in reversed narratives noted above, but also in the fact that the actress Magaly Solier plays main characters in both films. This fact amplifies the binary opposition of two films, especially in the context elaborated here – the trauma of the indigenous female – since the character of *Madeinusa* never experiences trauma but rather suffering, while Fausta on the other hand deliberately inflicts herself with suffering with potato inserted into her vagina. Fausta goes through suffering but she is overwhelmed by the trauma triggered by the *milk of sorrow* belief and by her mother's *llakis* (mourning song). We can rightly argue that not all suffering is traumatic (evident in *Madeinusa*) but on the other hand the trauma inevitably causes suffering (psychosomatic, mental or physical). Or does it? It often depends on the context of representation or the narrative positions of/on the subject. In this case it has already been criticized as the false trauma, because the symptom (the inserted potato) satisfies the subject and he does not want to be separated from it [2; p.439]. Curious case of suffering/trauma

interconnection also marks the important Colombian documentary *Los Chircales (The Brickmakers)* from 1972 directed by the anthropologists Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva which narrates the life and destiny of the poor and oppressed *Castañeda* family who force their small children to work in horrific conditions and to produce brick from mud and clay. What is important in *Los Chircales* is that the position of the extra-diegetic narrator decreases the viewer's insight into the lives of small children treated as day labourers. While we track the discourse of the narration, we are deprived of meditative time to oversee horror and isolated trauma of the individual. Strategies employed by Rodríguez and Silva aim towards anthropological holism of suffering of the Colombian subalterns and not towards individual trauma. We feel and see the suffering that goes on, but we do not witness the trauma because the narration leads us to determine the socio-political agenda.

The narrative structure of *The Milk of Sorrow* is overwhelmingly indebted to the research of Kimberly Theidon published in her book *Entre prójimos. El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en el Perú*. Theidon, a Harvard anthropologist gives an account of various indigenous women, victims of the rape in Peru during the clashes between *Sendero luminoso* and the government. Some of the victims were pregnant during the perpetration and they began to believe that they transmit the evil of their own nemeses through *macharisca ñuñu* (Quechuan for *the sad breast*) principle by feeding the supposed treachery milk to their new-born babies. This triggers the inevitable circle of traumatizing experience within the female community, as the mother feels obliged to relive her horrific experience before dying; she simultaneously inflicts the daughter with the truth and consequently the trauma (again arbitrary to some researchers). There are debates within the scholars whether the individual traumatizing experiences can be seen as the communal or even historical trauma of the indigenous. The mother/daughter trauma chain is often taken as symbolic or historic: “the trauma of these characters is not individual but rather communal and the history of Perpetua and Fausta is determined by a collective historical experience” [3; p.96]. The researchers that overviewed *The Milk of Sorrow* through the feminist agenda of false indigenous or even worse – false activism [4, 5] heavily contest this notion.

The key issue in this research is the question how does the unlived experience (Fausta was not raped, her mother was) produces trauma to the individual, and what are the ambiguities of trauma narrative represented in the film. As noted before, even the cultural heritage like indigenous language and rituals like self-confessional poetry performed by the mother determine how to remember even what has not been lived [6; p.40]. This poetry/songs known to the Quechua community as *llakis* are sources which identify the trauma, they are embodied states of mind of sorrow and pain, private yet collective [7; p.948]. *Llakis* derive from Quechuan *llakisqa*, meaning sorrow and suffering, and precisely this combination of sorrow and suffering, which emanates from the performance of the pre-mortal confessions by the mothers, triggers the trauma in the daughters.

THE NARRATIVE CORE: SONGS, DEAD PENIS AND THE POTATO

The plot of *The Milk of Sorrow* is at first glance very simple. Young Quechuan woman Fausta watches the death of her mother, and finds out the traumatic truth about rape, necro-felatio (mother was forced to put the castrated penis of her husband into her mouth) and consequently inserts the potato into her vagina in order to shield herself from the possible desecration. She lives with her uncle and his family, which seem to abandon the Quechuan traditions and the language in favour of *cholaje* lifestyle in the sub-urban Lima shantytown called Manchay³ – which in Quechua stands for horrible, and fear. *Cholaje* paradigm is absent in most researches, because it does not fit with *indigenist* agenda or resilience paradigm offered by Rojas. I think that the iconology of the *cholaje* milieu (weddings, *cholo*

music, chabola etc.) negates the conclusiveness of both approaches concerning the context of *The Milk of Sorrow*. It is useful to note when depicting the life of migrant Quechuan society in Lima during the 1980s and 1990s one cannot just overlook that the migrants were willingly acculturated towards *cholaje* lifestyle. They adopted the usage of Spanish even inside their homes, adopted the clothing, ceremonies, and entertainment – and to identify their community as pure indigenous is a false argument. Albites and Gómez [3] mention the *cholo* paradigm citing Quijano and his important essay *Dominación y cultura: Lo cholo y el conflicto cultural en el Peru* but they do not go any further with this notion [3; p.103]. So, it is important to note that Fausta lives in *cholo* community and culture, not the pure indigenous one and that this perspective changes a lot of arguments about the subject.

Fausta gets a job of a servant in a household of the reclusive pianist Aída and befriends her gardener Noé, who also speaks Quechua. She in a way forges a strange friendship with Noé precisely because of the Quechuan context (he uses the Quechua language and is versed in Quechuan botany and traditions). Lillo finds the character of Noé to be a fortunate dramaturgical anagnorisis that reveals the tension of unfulfillment [2; p.445]. Fausta is awarded with pearls for every song she performs for Aída who grows strangely attached to her, being in the creative crisis⁴. All these times Fausta feels the pain produced by the potato expanding in her genitals. Fausta case is interwoven with *cholaje*⁵ wedding business that her uncle's family runs and with ambiguous desire of her uncle, (some scholars saw it as an incestuous desire, some as the *pater familias* infirmity towards trauma). Fausta urges the removal of the potato from her genitals and finally refuses her uncle and decides to bury her mother in the desert sand near the Pacific coastline.

Claudia Llosa wrote the screenplay for *The Milk of Sorrow* heavily influenced by *Entre prójimos. El conflicto armado interno y la política de la reconciliación en el Perú*, a book by Kimberly Theidon published in 2004 in Lima. Theidon pretty much sets the scenery for Llosa's film by going into detail description and accounts of the indigenous women that were raped by the *Sendero luminoso* guerrilla and by the government military personnel. This includes the life in the suburban Lima in the *chabolas* (shacks) full of dirt and sand and raising the children in inappropriate sanitary conditions. She also emphasizes the importance of the *llakis* calling them *pensamientos emocionales* (emotional statements), as evident in the confession by one of the victims: "the *llakis* fill the heart, overflowing its capacity to contain so many painful memories" [8; p.64]. When the mother Perpetua (the name literally means perpetual but also life-long – almost invoking the circular trajectory of the trauma giver/taker) finishes her lament she asks Fausta to sing to her as to revive her memory because when the mother can no longer see her memories she is no longer living. This is a debatable point that manifests that the trauma is purposely kept alive only to be transmitted to the daughter. We could argue what would be the purpose of this trauma transmission; it lacks the vitality factor or even the benefit for the community? It seems that the gravity of the crime (mutilation, castration, rape) motivates the mother to keep the memory of a crime alive and that the contemplation about its consequences towards the daughter can be regarded as side-effects. Keeping this fact in mind it's no wonder that the *llakis* is obsessed with traumatic memory and the explicit depiction of its horrors. *Llakis* bear strong resemblance to the early Blues music of the Afro-Americans in the Deep South in the late 19th Century USA that also emphasizes the importance of reviving the memory of sadness, suffering and poverty.

Another aspect that Llosa borrowed from Theidon is the confessions of the mothers done in a form of an interview in *Entre prójimos* and displayed as the mother/daughter sorrowful *llakis* dialogue in the film. The very beginning of the narration starts as the dying mother's *llakis* over her ill-fated life after the military raped her and massacred her husband. To make the matters worse mother was pregnant while the horrific events occurred and she emphasizes this in her lament:

Perhaps, some day
 You will understand
 How much I cried
 I begged on my knees
 To those poor bastards
 That night, I screamed
 The hills echoed
 And people laughed
 I fought with my pain
 Saying: A bitch with rabies
 Must have given birth to you
 And that is why you have eaten her breasts
 Now, you can swallow me
 Now, you can suck me
 Like you did to your mother
 This woman who sings

was grabbed was raped
 That night they didn't care
 About my unborn daughter
 They raped me
 With their penis and hands
 With no pity for my daughter
 Watching them from inside
 And not satisfied with that
 They made me swallow
 The dead penis of my husband Josefo
 His poor dead penis
 Seasoned with gunpowder
 With that pain I screamed
 You better kill me
 And bury me with my Josefo
 I know nothing here

Horrific scenes depicted by the mother are, perhaps the most striking account of the atrocities and horrors experienced by the indigenous during the *Internal conflict*. The thought of “poor dead penis seasoned with gunpowder” highlights the suffering and trauma of the mother but is also a trigger that psychologically persecutes Fausta. In her interesting reading of *The milk of sorrow* Adriana Rojas offers a curious reading of the mothers lament: “The song becomes a metaphor for mother’s milk, which contains memories and, in this case, a legacy of trauma that the mother does not want to fall into oblivion” [1; p.301]. Rojas, writing from a perspective of a resilience of the indigenous to process, cope and overcome trauma sees the transmission of the trauma from mother to daughter almost as the necessity triggered by the song. Her analysis of the film is oppositional to the ones offered by Lillo [2] and Vich [9] which aim towards political and cultural significance of the identity representation in *The Milk of Sorrow*. Somewhere in the middle is a work recently published by Albites and Gómez [3], which deals with trauma and isolation context of the film and which is built upon a significance of the embodiment of the trauma – in this case the potato acting as the trauma signifier embodied into subject.

If we go back to the significance of the opening scene starting with a black screen, we can easily justify the visual brilliance of Llosa and her cinematographer Natasha Braier. First seven shots establish the whole context of the trauma and open a debate of the ambiguity we, as the observers witness:

1. Long Black screen with mother’s song/*llakis* – symbolizing death but also uncertainty.
2. Close-up of the dying mother singing – reviving the traumatic past.
3. Deep focus medium shot with Fausta and the shantytown in the background – establishing the indigenous-*cholaje* opposition.
4. Jump-cut with black screen and title of the film popping up – going back to uncertainty and ambiguity.
5. Long full shot of the uncle and his family – further elaborating Manchay and the migrant’s acculturation.
6. Medium shot of Fausta approaching the family with the bleeding nose and fainting – this being the first knowledge of the self-inflicted suffering and the nexus for most of the plot.
7. Close-up of awakened Fausta in the hospital bewildered – the key moment in which she trembles immediately but after feeling the potato inside of her relieves the tension.

Rojas sees the following short close-up of the ceiling lamp going on and off as the key symbolic moment of the resilience during trauma, since the light shines bright during the hospital scene in which the potato is finally removed from Fausta [1; p.302].



Figure 1. Fausta awakes from fainting in a hospital, and is unaware if the potato has been removed.



Figure 2. After finding out that the potato is still inside her she is ready to burden on with it.

The narrative structure of the film is intersected with various forms of songs; starting with the mother's *llakis* and moving on with Fausta's songs performed in Aída's house and with the corpse of the dead mother in the bed. This lyrical narrative keeps the viewer firmly within the notion of sorrow and performing the songs keeps Fausta interconnected with the memory of her dead mother, but also, as Lillo notes, they help her to rebuild her identity [2; p.443]. Rojas diverges in this matter, never questioning the loss of identity, but rather accents the songs as the tool of resilience. She concludes that the songs are a coping mechanism used to calm the performer in his fright and anguish [1; p.306]. Many scholars dismissed these claims [4, 5, 10] tackling the narrative from the perspective of dialectics between Andean and Western, urban and rural, Spanish and Quechua, master and servant. However, to reduce the narrative to binary opposition and to diminish *The Milk of Sorrow* only to suppose neo-colonial discourse does not justify the particularities of the narrative mentioned above.

THE AMBIGUITY OF THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE: THE TRIGGER AND THE SAFETY DICHOTOMY

In the contemporary psychiatry, the term trauma is associated with the wound inflicted not to the body but to the mind. The emotional shock produced by this wound is so powerful that it breaches the mind's experience of time, self and the world [11; p.6]. Medical theory on the trauma has centered on the individual, on the other hand the contemporary philosophy and cultural theory had put much effort on explaining the cultural trauma, triggered mostly by the World War II and its aftermath. In the case of the representation of the traumatic experiences applied to a collective or even a culture it is a debatable notion, especially evident in the topic of the indigenous trauma, so much depends on the researchers own perspective in finding the

neuralgic points. I have already mentioned the opposite reading of the cultural trauma topic in *The Milk of Sorrow* (see [1, 3] vs. [2, 4, 5]) and precisely this ambivalence of the research opens up a question: What is the reason for this differences? It seems that the answer lies in the ambiguity of the trauma narrative best exemplified by the dichotomy of potato acting as the trigger and the safety.

Previously I have noted the importance of the un-lived experience in the self-inflicted oppression. Geoffrey Hartman, writing about traumatic knowledge points out an important notion: “There is an original inner catastrophe whereby/in which an experience that is not experienced and apparently, not ‘real’ has an exceptional presence – is inscribed with a force proportional to the mediations punctured or evaded” [12; p.537]. This is evidently omnipresent in *The Milk of Sorrow* in two distinctive ways. First, there is a cunning congruence between Fausta’s case with the potato and Hartman’s notion. The fear of the rape is in this case the inner catastrophe which has exceptional presence, not only for Fausta, but for her surroundings. The fear is the signified agency of the trauma, and although it cannot be grasped or fully narrated we as the observers can feel its presence. The rape has not been committed on Fausta, but rather on her mother and to sustain the ever growing horror of its possible reoccurrence we witness the inserted potato. The fact that the potato is never explicitly shown makes it an even more present, since the audience cannot forget that it is still in Fausta’s genitals. The markers of its presence also mark the shifts in the plot.



Figure 3. A potato sprout drops off from Fausta’s genitals. It reminds the viewer that the fear and the trauma is still present and not resolved.

After the potato sprout drop off from her genitals on the sand floor it reminds us that the fear is still there, that the trauma has not been resolved. The potato becomes the most potent iconological symbol in the film but with very opposed contextualizing. Being a native plant of Peru it is shown as the fortune telling device in a scene where Maxima tries to peel the skin of a potato in one piece, and which, according to Fausta’s Uncle is a sign of a good fortune and long life. Rojas has made a case of the potato symbolism in her article circling around the Quechuan traditions concerning potato, but she also ventured into explaining how the vaginal entrapment of the potato is in fact the symbol of fear of the lost mother. She further reads the potato trajectory in line with the Derrida’s concepts of incorporation, mourning and interjection. Rojas concludes that: “The potato in her vagina further echoes the Derridean notion that she keeps her dead mother inside (incorporation) of her as if she (Fausta) were a crypt. Then Fausta finally introjects her, meaning that she draws her mother’s memory into her own, but has her own life. This process of mourning, incorporation and introjection I interpret as a necessary part of Fausta’s journey to resilience” [1; p.307]. What I find inconclusive in this curious reading of the film is the context of the potato being a surrogate of the dead mother who has to be incorporated and introjected in order to acquire

resilience. Final scene in which the blossomed potato in a jar appears in front of Fausta's doors in an ambiguous one; according to Rojas it can be seen as the spirit of the dead mother that Fausta has introjected, it can also be a hint of a new found union between Noé and Fausta.

All of the above signals the ambiguity of the trauma narrative exemplified by the potato question. What is it? I am opting for a trigger/safety dichotomy. Long shots containing only Fausta in the frame offer either the silence interwoven with her suffering from genital pain or her singing to retell her own story. In both cases the viewer is always reminded that the potato acting as the trigger/safety is omnipresent. The potato in fact becomes the narrator of the personal trauma. The fact that is hidden inside the genitals makes it an even more appropriate tool of emphasizing the trouble of the trauma narrative. Writing about trauma Everyman warns us that: "Personal trauma is difficult to narrate as it is lived through. It is formidable, not to say impossible, grasp the meaning of shocking occurrences as they are experienced. It is only after fact that interpretation and real understanding become." [13; p.49]. What is evident in my view is precisely the fact that the trauma is being experienced and lived through in front of the viewer because of the trigger/safety dichotomy of the potato. The real understanding that Everyman notes comes before the end when a removal of the potato marks the end of the trigger/safety mechanism.

Dichotomy of this simultaneous mechanism appears from the very fact that the trauma is triggered by the fear of rape and the mother's *llakis*, hence the potato insertion from the fear of the rape. At the same time a trauma is not resolved because the triggered action also acts as the safety one: to keep the possible perpetrators away. These binaries fall perfectly in the trauma definition offered by Hartman because the force of the traumatic experience – lived and performed by Fausta – is proportional to mediations punctured or evaded. Punctures can be ascribed as the side-effects of the trigger performance: the potato acting as the reminder of the suffering slowly disables Fausta in her everyday life. Visually this is elaborated by the clever usage of the homodiegetic songs performed by Fausta presented as the voice overs of her own scenes of mute isolation and traumatic meditation. On the other hand, evaded actions can be seen as the acts of the safety part of the mechanism which also slowly disables Fausta: the potato acting as the safety for the unperformed rape becomes futile and pointless agency of suffering. There is some truth in Lillo's mentioned notion of how the symptom satisfies the subject and he does not want to be separated from it, but I think that the method is missing. The potato, if we take it as the trigger/safety mechanism satisfies the subject (Fausta) not because it holds some sacerdotal context (object of desire/pain) but precisely because it shields from the fear of the rape, while at the same time keeps the memory of the un-lived experience alive. Finally, the removal of the potato means that the whole mechanism is dismantled and that the dichotomy of its performance is finally cancelled.

CONCLUSION

Claudia Llosa stirred a lot of debates and controversies with her film *The Milk of Sorrow*, especially in the context of the trauma narrative and its representation. I have displayed the main differences and neuralgic points in the researches done so far. The main argument in my analysis is that the trauma narrative cannot be unilaterally understood because the trauma mechanism, exemplified by the dichotomy of the trigger/safety device of the potato represents an ambiguity of the trauma. Scholars were aiming either to downgrade or dismiss Llosa's alleged neo-colonialism or false indigenous agenda of the film or to defend, again an alleged resilience and trauma coping mechanism represented through the protagonist Fausta. I opted for an ambivalence of the signified trauma, especially because of the uncertainty that the narration of the trauma displays. Using the symbolism but also the practical and performative nature of the potato, I have marked the potato as the real signifier of the trauma.

The trigger/safety mechanism answers many debateable points in the narration, especially the trauma transmission from the mother to her daughter, which has questionable purpose if we approach it from the solely negative or affirmative perspective. Using the ambiguous nature of the trauma narrative the film opens up as the mediation process which includes both the punctures and evasions, and this trajectory of the narration is only apprehensible through the trigger/safety mechanism. It is curious fact that in *The Milk of Sorrow* the narration which becomes most important is the one that is un-narrated, the inner state of mind of the protagonist exemplified by the role and significance of the potato. The viewer cannot forget that the potato is inside the protagonist's genitals almost through the entire film, and this notion highlights the ambiguity of the whole story. In my mind, excluding the identity and indigenous agenda of the film, *The Milk of Sorrow* represents a cleverly designed dichotomy of the trauma narrative and is thus an important and curious study of the representation of the personal trauma interpolated into cultural, community and feminist context.

REMARKS

¹Afro-Brazilian religious tradition that originated in Bahia in the 19th century. Lacking the scripture it is primarily marked by the ritual music and dancing. Rocha represented the candomblé as the obstacle for socialism in Brazil.

²Sorrowful Virgin – in this case a child is represented as the crying Virgin, as to commemorate the Mother and the Virgin duality similar to Child-Woman duality of coming of age.

³*Cholaje* – standing for a culture of the *cholos* – an offspring of mestizo and the indigenous – but can be loosely applied for a hybrid culture of the indigenous populations in the urban parts of Peru and Bolivia.

⁴Manchay – a suburb of Lima was founded by the indigenous migrants fleeing from the rural parts during the *Internal conflict* in the 1980s.

⁵The relationship between Fausta and Aída was over-amplified in the previous researches, built upon *criollo-indigenous*, master and servant, rich and poor, urban and rural binary opposition aiming at the false class representation and neo-colonial incorrectness of Llosa's approach. I will not go into this direction because the relationship is not crucial for trauma expose.

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