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Disturbing Mexico: drug war victims and victimizers in Mexican film

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Thesis

**DISTURBING MEXICO:
DRUG WAR VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS IN MEXICAN FILM**

by

DANIELA FRANCO VELÁZQUEZ

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Approved by

First Reader

Deborah L. Jaramillo, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Film & Television

Second Reader

Adela E. Pineda, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Spanish

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Román Ernesto,
who taught me to never give up.

May his memory live forever through these pages.

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa mobilized the Mexican military into high risk zones which, along with the ongoing battle between drug cartels for territorial control, unleashed a wave of violent crimes toward the civilian population. As a response to the overwhelming amounts of violence that the Mexican people were exposed to, filmmakers started producing movies that revolved around the havoc wreaked by the cartels during the Drug War and represent how it affects Mexicans on a daily basis. This thesis comprises a detailed study of the three most representative film works that depict the narco-violence taking place in Mexico produced during and after Calderón's government: Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013), Gerardo Naranjo's *Miss Bala* (2011), and Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* (2010). In each film, the directors expose the bloodshed and political and societal corruption caused by the Drug War. This thesis analyzes each director's attempt to raise awareness of the way the Drug War affects civilians through their narrative and visual styles and their use of graphic violence to disturb viewers and inspire them to reform the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Latin American film has been influenced by political context since the medium's inception. For example, Mexican nationalist cinema was born in the 1940s as a way to reinforce the ideology that inspired the country's Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Argentinian ultra-left group *Cine de la Base*¹ emerged as a way to stop the precarious conditions in which workers lived during the 1970s. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Latin American filmmakers have often used cinema as a way of raising the consciousness of citizens on issues affecting society and motivate them to act against those discriminating and abusing them (Burton 50). In his writings on militant cinema, Octavio Getino claims that in countries "saturated with false information or simply lacking any at all, it is a priority to develop a cinema ... that can remedy" (46), that can help audiences realize the situations in which they live and offer them guidance to self-improvement. During his time in Mexico, Luis Buñuel, astonished by the harsh conditions in which street kids subsisted in Mexico City, made *Los Olvidados* (1950), a film that unsettled audiences accustomed to a romanticized and sentimentalized portrayal of the poor created by nationalist and studio cinema (Mora 91). Similarly, in *Los Traidores* (1973), Raymundo Gleyzer uses Argentinian political symbols and characters to show the injustices suffered by national laborers at the hand of avaricious politicians. In such a way, filmmakers have been able to use their cameras to help audiences be aware of

¹ *Cine de la Base* was a clandestine political film movement inspired by a Marxist ideology that aimed to raise awareness on the Argentinian people against Peronism (Vieguer 50).

the reality they live in and urge them to rebel against those exploiting them.

Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea established that through the experiences and feelings lived by audiences, the cinematic spectacle can unleash a series of ideas and thoughts that, ultimately, will make them think about the role they occupy in the situations depicted (34). That is, film is a reflection of reality that manifests social consciousness (Gutiérrez Alea 32). Both Getino and Gutiérrez Alea agree that works of fiction that somewhat differ from reality, instead of hiding the truth, can highlight a specific historical or political circumstance (Getino 47). Therefore, in order to allow audiences to better appreciate and understand their environment, a cinema that raises social consciousness must be a fictionalized version of the world inhabited by audiences (Gutiérrez Alea 33). Only then will cinema transform viewers from “passive” to “active” spectators who, guided by film, will understand reality and take transformative action (Gutiérrez Alea 38). Moreover, Gutiérrez Alea states that film itself must contain and convey the measures that viewers can take to better comprehend the truth and change their reality (41). For example, in *Yawar Mallku – La Sange del Cóndor* (1969) Jorge Sanjinés portrays the discrimination suffered by the indigenous population in 1960s Bolivia and the way in which the Peace Corps abused them. At the end of the film, the filmmaker urges viewers to take action by displaying a group of hands lifting firearms against the sky, conveying that the only way to solve the issues shown in the film is by rebelling against those in power. As a result, the film unleashed a series of investigations

carried out by the press, medics, and government officials that concluded in the expulsion of the Peace Corps from Bolivia (Burton 46).

Since the arrival of the cinematic apparatus to Mexico, the medium has shown audiences sequences taken from reality, helping them to be “better acquainted with their own societies” (Mora 7). The advent of film arrived to Mexico not long after the Lumière brothers’ invention became popular in Europe (Mora 5), and from the beginning, Mexican audiences witnessed different portrayals of reality, both national and international. Salvador Toscano Barragán and Enrique Rosas, who are considered the first Mexican filmmakers, were the first to film real-life events in the country, known as *actualidades*, which they later showed in their own film salons in Mexico City (Mora 7–8). Because of the medium’s appeal to the Mexican people, politicians soon began to use the medium as a tool for propaganda. Before the 1910 Revolution, even when lower-economical classes were harmed by the lack of social justice in President Porfirio Díaz’s government, they were enthusiastic about film and enjoyed seeing the mandatory inaugurating railroads and meeting foreign politicians, such as President William Howard Taft in 1909 (Mora 13). Once the Revolution came, Barragán and Rosas recorded political meetings and important battles that displayed the violent war taking place in the country (Mora 13). *La Revolución en Chihuahua* (*The Revolution in Chihuahua*, 1912) stirred a victorious emotion in Madero’s followers by showing his military forces battling against Pascual Orozco in the north, while *Sangre Hermana* (*Blood of Brothers*, 1914) aimed to inspire an

anti-Zapata feeling (Mora 15–17). Moreover, when war broke out in Europe in 1914, Mexican film salons screened the latest combat reels weekly, continuing to show explicit violence to the Mexican public, this time coming from the other side of the world (Mora 18). Hence, cinema not only attempted to show real life since its arrival to Mexico, but also invaded the country's projection rooms with graphic scenes of the Revolution and the First World War, bringing the combat closer to Mexican spectators and making them globally and locally aware.

In his book on Mexican cinema and its relationship with society, Carl J. Mora mentions that Mexican films were practically non-existent before 1910 (12). Therefore, the industry was born in the middle of violent battles and political conflicts that shaped the country through the Revolution. Among all narrative and documentary silent films made during the Revolution, and before the beginning of Mexican film classicism, one stands out for its unique portrayal of violence, representation of real life events, and sophisticated style, which allowed the industry to start the transformation into the Mexican cinema's Golden Age. *La banda del automóvil gris* (1919), filmed by Enrique Rosas and originally shown as a twelve-episode serial, was based on a series of robberies that occurred in Mexico City in 1915. The crimes were famous for the felons' brutality when attacking their victims, who were some of the wealthiest families in Mexico City. Rosas was inspired to make the film when he recorded the execution of the real criminals in 1915 (Mora 22), which he included at the end of the movie. The finale, together with location shooting and the performances of the policemen

involved in the original case, increases the film's authenticity and provides a hyperrealistic portrayal of violent real-life events, making audiences feel closer to the events depicted. After the advent of sound in film, Rosas's descendants reedited the original serial twice, in 1933 and 1937, shortened it to 111 minutes, and added sound effects and dialogue (Ramirez Berg 4). The new editions, fit for post-revolutionary audiences, were re-exhibited in theaters and viewers all over the country were able to relive the terror that the wealthiest inhabitants of Mexico City experienced during 1915.

Bringing the panic of frightening criminal events or international wars to audiences' through film is not a practice exclusive to Mexican cinema. However, it is worth noting that Mexican viewers have, since the production of the first films and *actualidades*, been fascinated with violent events and the power of living them through the screen. American director Brian De Palma explains, "Motion pictures are a kinetic art form; you're dealing with motion and sometimes that can be violent motion" (qtd. in Prince 2). Hence, violence is tied to the medium's mechanical properties and, since film is one of the only art forms that visually represents violence, in movement, it astonishes and thrills audiences incapable of experiencing it in the same way in static media. Therefore, even when by the end of the 1910s Mexican audiences were growing weary of documentary films because of their propagandistic nature and their portrayal of a drawn-out war (Ramirez Berg 5), they welcomed narrative films that portrayed violent real-life events. Thus, it is not surprising that every time *La banda del automóvil gris* was

edited and projected, it continued to shock Mexican spectators who were fascinated with such a violent depiction of a foreign reality, even though it was taking place in their country.

Nowadays, more than a hundred years after the Revolution and the production of the first national films, Mexicans find themselves in the middle of a different type of war, brought closer to them by television, newspapers, and the Internet, and which, even when inhabitants might not be involved in the conflict, often affects them directly. The fighting is a consequence of the disputes of Mexican drug cartels over territories and export routes to the United States. In their article on Mexican drug organizations and their impact on society, Tomas Kellner and Francesco Pipitone explain that the death of Colombian kingpin Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria allowed Mexican cartels to become the leading exporters of drugs into the United States (30), and establish the Sinaloa Cartel as the largest and most powerful of the Mexican criminal organization (31). Furthermore, they explain that the drug war exploded in 2003 as a result of the fighting between the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas for the control of the border city Nuevo Laredo (32). When President Felipe Calderon tried to control the situation by sending the military to Michoacán in 2006, the bloodshed only increased (31). Since the battles, shootings, and severed bodies are easier to document and access than they were back in 1910, they serve as a constant reminder to Mexicans of the dangers of everyday life.

Kellner and Pipitone point out that kidnapping is one of the many perils

facing citizens during the drug war, for the practice of illicit activities in nonviolent and relatively drug-free states can help drug organizations acquire money faster than drug trade (33). One of the best examples is the case of Aguascalientes, a small state in the center of the country that got Los Zetas's attention because of its reputation as a peaceful territory. In early 2008, the criminal group kidnapped many of the children of the state's most prominent businessmen and, by 2009, "Aguascalientes had become a terrifying place to live" (Kellner and Pipitone 33). Moreover, Los Zetas's presence in the state enhanced the local drug market, which increased the consumption of illegal substances and with it, the amount of home invasions carried out by drug addicts. Even though the images and videos of devastating events happening to innocent people throughout the country shown by the media have produced a continuous state of terror in Mexico, they have failed to create any emotion that inspires individuals to fix their apathy. The oversaturation of war images in mass media has made them generic and meaningless, showing anonymous victims for whom viewers feel little empathy (Sontag 9). Susan Sontag, who has written about the effects of war photography, claims that the constant flow of explicit images of suffering and dismembered bodies, despite initially causing shock and arousing indignation, ultimately numbs viewers' sensibilities and makes them lose their capacity to react (108). When it seems impossible for a conflict to stop, people become less responsive to its consequences (Sontag 101) and more habituated to the horror in real life and the images depicting it (Sontag 83). However, as Susana Rotker states in her

writings on Latin American violence, while objective facts such as photographs of unknown murdered individuals eventually desensitize those living in a violent environment, subjective experiences that affect citizens, or someone close to them, have a more powerful effect on society and help them comprehend the gravity of their situation (8). This is where film comes in, for the cinematic medium has the ability to portray different ways, both real and fictional, in which the violence that inhabits the country can affect innocent men and women.

As previously mentioned, violence has always been an important element of the cinematic medium, and audiences' enthusiasm for it continuously inspires film industries to increase the amount of visceral content in movies (Prince 1). Hence, violence is often used with the purpose of entertaining viewers and selling movie tickets to the point that certain filmmakers' style are defined by their particular use of violence, such as Quentin Tarantino or Martin Scorsese. The popularity of violence in films has also allowed filmmakers to enhance the realism of the brutal acts depicted, offering spectators a more sensationalized and graphic spectacle that haunts them as they witness the events taking place. Susan Sontag states that graphic images are a way of "making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe prefer to ignore" (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 7). Therefore, images showing human suffering in a foreign environment force viewers to understand and relate to events they would otherwise not be able to comprehend. Yet, Sontag sees the cinematic medium as incapable of causing a reaction in the viewer. She claims that once movies are

shown, they disappear, whereas a photograph is a tangible object that can be appreciated for as long as one wants to (*On Photography*, 3). While I consider her findings on the effects of photography highly valuable, I can only disagree with Sontag's devaluation of film as an art form unable to convey an idea and create a response in audiences. Film allows viewers to connect with the characters in the story, inhabit their lives, and see a version of reality through their eyes. By the end of a movie, spectators will have experienced a series of emotions and acquired ideas that will make them reflect on the events that transpired. Therefore, if film is a medium that can raise social consciousness in spectators by showing reality, as Gutiérrez Alea states, then, by the end, viewers will better understand their environment through the judgments and ideas conveyed by the filmmaker.

Mexican cinema has portrayed reality in different ways since its arrival to the country, and it has similarly attempted to represent the drug war. Just as the news media shows graphic images of individuals affected by the drug conflict, Mexican cinema has produced its own version of the terrifying events that are part of the country's everyday life and has constructed narratives, either real or fictional that show the many ways in which citizens become victims of narco-violence. By portraying stories connected to real life events, and characters to whom audiences can relate, Mexican filmmakers have tried to raise social consciousness. Hence, in a reality where violence is part of daily life, film must portray those brutal acts in an equally gruesome way, as well as the effects they

have on society, to have an impact on the spectator. Still, if one understands that ultraviolent films are often produced to fulfill the excitement of audiences for graphic content (Prince 1), then one can conclude that violence is frequently used in films as a way to encourage viewers to go to the theater, instead of making a statement about their reality. Therefore, to make sure that films have an effect beyond the sensory level on audiences, filmmakers must be careful with the way in which they handle representations of violence, point out the institutions contributing to it, and elicit a reaction by showing conflict-stricken citizens.

After the wave of violence unleashed when President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa sent military troops to his home state of Michoacán to try to end the war between the drug cartels, Mexican filmmakers started producing movies that portray the brutality of narco-violence and revolve around common individuals that find themselves involved in the conflict. This thesis focuses on the works of film produced during the Mexican Drug War that include an ultra-violent portrayal of narco-violence and seek to raise awareness of the bloodshed and corruption plaguing Mexico to inspire viewers to act and reform the political and social landscape of the country. In order to do so, I concentrate on the three most representative films that portray different ways in which the violence caused by the drug conflict affects innocent citizens: Luis Estrada's *El Infierno* (2010), Gerardo Naranjo's *Miss Bala* (2011), and Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013). In each film, the director points out the systemic failures that prevent society to move

forward and the ways in which each citizen may be affected by violence and dishonesty. The protagonists in all three films are not only hardworking individuals who represent the majority of the country's population, but they become the central characters in major conflicts with the cartels and are witnesses and victims of several violent acts. They are individuals foreign to the drug battle that, in different ways, become involved in the struggle. In *Heli*, the title character finds a pack of cocaine that belongs to his sister's military boyfriend, *Miss Bala*'s Laura escapes from a shooting in a club and becomes part of a criminal operation when she was trying to find her friend, and in *El Infierno*, Benny starts working as a hitman for a drug organization when he needs money to bribe the corrupt policemen who have his nephew in jail. Even when the situations portrayed in each storyline are different, the three films show viewers several ways in which they can become involuntarily involved in the Drug War.

The first chapter focuses on Amat Escalante's attempt to provide an explanation for the images of the hanged, decapitated, and tortured bodies that appear on media in *Heli*. The section concentrates on how a dramatization of reality raises awareness through Escalante's visual and narrative methods. Escalante visually disorients viewers to convey that Mexican people do not comprehend how the country deteriorated and signals several institutions that prevent the country from being a just, peaceful, and economically stable place. He points out poverty, corruption, and the incompetence of the law as some of

the main factors that contribute to crime and violence. Additionally, he increases the authenticity of the film and makes it difficult for viewers to realize that they are watching a fictionalized version of reality through his use of long shots, long takes, location shooting, and non-professional actors.

The second chapter analyzes Gerardo Naranjo's *Miss Bala*, based on the case of Laura Zúñiga, the state of Sinaloa's contestant to the beauty pageant *Nuestra Belleza México*, who was arrested in 2008 for having links with the Juárez Cartel. This chapter focuses on Naranjo's adaptation of real life events and scandals to film as a way of raising social awareness. The filmmaker mixes reality with fiction to portray the corrupt relationship between criminal organizations and law enforcement officials and creates a sense of hopelessness toward the future of the country. He depicts the dangers posed to ordinary people during the Drug War, as both the authorities and drug cartels abuse citizens in their fight for power, and conveys that anyone can become collateral damage or get unintentionally involved in illicit operations in the government's battle to stop drug trafficking into the United States.

The third chapter concentrates on Luis Estrada's political satire *El Infierno* (2010), which criticizes the government's use of the bicentennial of the Independence as a way to distract Mexicans from the violent Drug War. Estrada comments on the corrupt political system of the country and the government's usage of national historic symbols to manipulate the people. Estrada portrays citizens as already complicit in the corruption and crime, and stresses that

anyone can become a wealthy and powerful individual if he or she is willing to take the necessary actions by becoming an active participant in illicit organizations. The filmmaker represents Mexican reality in a humoristic and disturbing way by employing satire and graphic violence, raising awareness of the events taking place in the country during the Drug War and the government's attempt to distract civilians from their upsetting environment.

The three directors utilize violence as a way to shock viewers and highlight the need to take action to change the country. This thesis analyzes how the filmmakers achieve to create consciousness, on the bloodshed and corruption inhabiting the country through their narratives and visual styles, and motivate viewers to take transformative action.

CHAPTER ONE

DOOMED INNOCENCE:

CIVILIAN VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS IN AMAT ESCALANTE'S *HELI*

In May 2013, halfway through the screening of Amat Escalante's *Heli* at the Cannes Film Festival, several critics and audience members left the theater due to the film's ultra-violent scenes, including one where a man's genitalia is lit on fire (Paz). The first reactions from critics all around the globe condemned Escalante's use of violence, claiming that it was gratuitous and excessive (Shoard et al.). The public's response to Escalante's film re-opened the debate on the accessibility of images of mutilated human bodies in mass media, the effects of displaying violent acts in film, and how much violence filmmakers and media producers should be allowed to show on screen. In her book on the effects of war photography, Susan Sontag questions the repercussions and objectives of graphic depictions of violence in newspapers, television, and the Internet to privileged citizens who are far from the battlefield. She poses the questions, "What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad' ... to appall and sadden? To help us mourn?" (91-2), and proposes that one of the many reasons why the media publishes graphic images of violence is to disturb spectators and perhaps incite them to act. At the same time, she acknowledges that, just as portrayals of ultra-violence can evoke feelings of disgust and fear, they also allure and attract audiences, inviting them to admire the depictions of gruesome acts that human beings have committed all over the

world throughout history (96). Escalante, who directed and co-wrote *Heli*, states that his prime goal when making the film was to portray the world in which Mexicans live through a story that provides an explanation for the images of the hanged, decapitated, and tortured men that appear every day in national newspapers. Still, he emphasizes that *Heli* is told from his point of view as someone who is worried for his country (Gómez). That is, he clarifies that *Heli* is a dramatization of reality, not an objective portrayal of the world and environment inhabited by the Mexican people.

In Latin America, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is one of the main theoreticians and filmmakers who sees the medium as a way to raise social consciousness and incite audiences to take the necessary actions to fix the political and societal realities portrayed. He states that, in order for audiences to be aware of and understand the factors that affect the world in which they live, filmmakers must present their realities through a fictional story (33). Escalante did so in *Heli* and in his previous films, *Los Bastardos* (2008), where he exposes the conditions under which Mexican immigrants survive in the United States, and *Sangre* (2005), which shows the agitated interruption of a marriage's routine life based on watching soap operas, having sex, and fighting. In such a way, Escalante takes themes from contemporary Mexican society and transforms situations experienced by audiences into fictional stories. Furthermore, Gutiérrez Alea stresses that, in order for a film to be able to raise social consciousness, it must transform the spectator from a *passive* to an *active* viewer so that he or she can

think critically about the issues depicted and take transformative actions (38). Escalante is able to reinforce a deeper understanding of viewers' environment and incite them to "stop being mere spectators in the face of reality" (Gutiérrez Alea 30) by emphasizing Mexican systemic failures, such as a corrupt law enforcement, and depicting how a low-income family becomes victim of the cycle of criminal violence created by the Drug War. Additionally, Escalante's constant use of ultra-violent images allows him to strengthen in viewers the need to react against the matters represented in the film for, as Sontag explains, "showing something at its worst ... invites to an active response" (81). Thus, in using a merciless depiction of violence, Escalante's intention is not to attract audiences in a time when the popularity of bloody spectacles has made the film industry increase the production of violent films (Prince 1), but to create awareness and motivate a response in Mexican viewers.

Heli, titled after the film's protagonist, tells the story of a young man who lives with his sister, father, wife, and infant son in a humble community in Guanajuato, a state that, according to the online newspaper *Sin Embargo*, was considered among the most peaceful in Mexico up until 2014. Estela, Heli's twelve year old sister, becomes romantically involved with Beto, a seventeen year old cadet. Despite Beto's enthusiastic attempts, Estela refuses to engage in sexual relations with him out of fear of becoming pregnant, which leads Beto into suggesting they elope. To secure their future, Beto steals two packages of cocaine that his corrupt squad had supposedly destroyed and hides them in

Estela's house. Heli finds the drugs and throws them away. Beto's troop comes to Heli's house looking for the stolen packages, kills his father and, once they realize that the packages are not there, kidnap Heli and Estela. The platoon then takes Estela to an unknown place and brings Heli and Beto—who is sitting in the car beaten up—to a house where a group of young men and children, presumably members of a criminal organization, torture them. The young gangsters kill Beto, hang his corpse from a bridge, and set Heli free after beating him up. Heli goes to the police, who fail to find the perpetrators or his sister, and ask the protagonist to sign a false declaration stating that his father had links with a criminal organization, which would explain why a military group tormented his family. Heli refuses to do so and the detectives fail to solve the case and find the culprits, thus proving their incompetence. After a few weeks, Estela comes back on her own; she is pregnant and in shock after being kept prisoner. At the end, when Heli realizes that the government officials will not deliver justice to him and his family, he decides to take matters into his own hands and go after his sister's attackers.

The plot of the film is complicated and involves several aspects of society and justice that affect rural life in Guanajuato, such as poverty, corruption, teenage pregnancy, police incompetence, and violence. Escalante's visual style, composed by long shots, long takes, slow-paced editing, deserted landscapes, and non-professional actors, heightens *Heli's* realistic depiction of life and makes it difficult for audiences to realize that they are watching a fictionalized

representation of reality. Escalante's focus is to show the way in which innocents, whether they are adult civilians who are not involved in criminal activities or helpless children, are affected by the wave of violence that arose after the Drug War began. Moreover, by setting his story in Guanajuato, a state considered safe at the time of the filming, Escalante confirms that nobody in Mexico is exempt from the cycle of criminal violence created by drug trafficking into the United States. When combined with the portrayal of ultra-violent acts, the authenticity of the film allows Escalante to raise social awareness among Mexican viewers on the issues destroying citizen's lives. Yet, instead of inciting viewers to take transformative action by proposing solutions to the problems presented in the narrative, which Gutiérrez Alea states is a necessity in a socially conscious film (41), Escalante depicts a worst case scenario for the Mexican people. While the film seems to motivate viewers to embrace vigilantism as a solution to fix the country, Escalante actually condemns the people taking matters into their own hands, since Heli's actions do not ultimately solve any societal and political problems. Thus, Escalante represents the way in which delinquency affects Mexicans and encourages audiences to take action against the issues presented in society before it is too late, before they become part of the cycle of violence, crime, and corruption in Mexico.

The beginning of *Heli* allows viewers to understand the situations that lead to violence and the second half shows the hopelessness there is in putting one's faith in the authorities, portraying the horrible scenario of which audiences could

be apart. In this chapter I am going to discuss the different methods that Amat Escalante utilizes to create social consciousness in his viewers on the environment they inhabit, focusing on his particular use of ultra-violence. To do so, I will first talk about the rural setting of the film and how this location had been used in Mexican cinema to express the issues and worries of the society at the time. Then I will analyze how the director attempts to disorient spectators throughout the film and, at the same time, includes powerful symbols that serve as a way of pointing out certain institutions that contribute to the consistent state of violence and corruption in Mexico. Finally, I will describe the way in which Escalante depicts innocents and how they become involved in the cycle of criminal violence, emphasizing how the filmmaker portrays the violent acts in his attempt to shock viewers and raise social awareness.

The Rural as a Reflection of Society's Ideology

Since the beginning of Mexican cinema, rural settings have served as a way to exemplify society's culture through their themes and the way they develop in a provincial location. In the 1940s, during the Golden Age of Mexican film, rural environments and their characters were romanticized to express a feeling of nationalism and proudly show the world a cinematic image of the country with its rich history and traditions (De la Vega Alfaro 87). As such, the portrayal of Mexican Indians became an important part of national cinema at the time, and the work of the filmmaker Emilio "El Indio" Fernández is one of the most "intensely nationalistic and overly sympathetic to the Indian" (Mora 58) by

portraying them as a pure, kind, and naïve sector of society. Yet, Fernández's work was often criticized for presenting Mexican culture from an outsider's point of view, showing Indians calmly rowing their canoes along the scenic waters of Xochimilco and creating a stereotype of Mexicanness that would be imitated by both national and international filmmakers (Mora 65). Nevertheless, Fernández's films were complex and went beyond expressing the nationalistic feeling of the period. For instance, *María Candelaria* (1944), the first Mexican film to be awarded at the Cannes Film Festival, portrays the clash between tradition and modernity lived by Mexican society in the 1940s (De la Vega Alfaro 87). The title character, a poor indigenous woman living in the underdeveloped area of pre-revolutionary Xochimilco, gathers and sells flowers for a living. Despite being honest and hardworking, María Candelaria and her lover are constantly tormented by the townsfolk because she is the daughter of a prostitute. The tragic ending shows the people violently stoning the protagonist to death when they believe that she posed naked for a painter who lives in the capital, depicting a collision between the conservative values of Indians and the progressive inhabitants of the city.

Hence, as Julia Tuñón explains, Fernández's films not only convey a proud depiction of nationalism and Indians, but also the need for education among Mexican citizens (186), especially those who live far from urbanization. Still, Fernández's work portrays the great paradox of nationalism, as those who were considered the faces of Mexicanness were the ones ignored by the

government of the then-President Miguel Alemán and his developmental reforms, which placed the Indians in a separate sphere, just as they had been in the years before the Revolution (Tuñón 179). Thus, by representing a pre-revolutionary scenario, Fernandez's work also brings the past hierarchy into modern Mexico, placing the Indians at the bottom of the pyramid. This social order is also depicted in other films of the era, such as Fernando de Fuentes's *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936), which marked the start of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. Set in a rural *hacienda* (ranch), the landowner acts as a paternal and authoritative figure over his employees, tenants, and women, some of whom are Indian. Films like *Allá en el Rancho Grande* do not attempt to initiate social change, but to maintain the actual state of affairs. That is, they juxtapose the modernizing and liberal trends originating in the cities with the traditional and Catholic values represented through the provincial location and its characters (Mora 47), showing an idealized status quo in which each individual knows their place and is content with it.

Another film that depicts the social and political worries of Mexican culture at the time is Felipe Cazal's *Canoa* (1975). Based in real life events, *Canoa* is "the most powerful and unsettling statement on the bloody repression of 1968" according to film historian Carl J. Mora (124). In that year, there was a restless feeling of resentment growing among citizens, especially university students, because Mexico had been chosen to host the Summer Olympics at a time when there was inequality in who was benefitted by a quarter-century of economic

growth and the suppressive government of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (Mora 111–2). The growing manifestations of discomfort against the government led to one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the country, the Tlatelolco massacre on October 2nd 1968². However, *Canoa* is based on a different terrible event of that year. On September 1968, five young workers of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla were on their way to climb a nearby mountain and stopped at the rural community of San Miguel Canoa, Puebla. They were forced to seek lodging for the night at the town due to an unexpected storm. Afraid that the young men were part of the student movement that was taking place in the country that year, a multitude of locals gathered and decided to attack the visitors. They went to the house where the young men were staying, killed the owner, two of the guests, and severely beat the other three.

The blood shed on 1968 was not *Canoa*'s only influence. After the decline of the Golden Age, a wave of leftist and intellectual filmmakers started to emerge. Shaped by universities, they were aware of the issues and injustice occurring on in the country and attempted to produce a cinema that would honestly depict Mexican reality (Mora 111). Cazals does so by utilizing a documentary style in *Canoa* by including the dates and times of the events and having a villager speaking to the camera giving socioeconomic data. Thus, the filmmaker attempts

² Carl J. Mora narrates that, as the Summer Olympics approached and the students continued to publicly demonstrate their discomfort, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and his minister of Gobernación, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, feared that the country's international prestige would be tainted by the unconformities of the youth. In October 2nd, 1968, when there was a big student march in the capital, the executives sent the army to the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Tlatelolco to attack the students. The result was a night of blood and horror where over three hundred persons were killed and hundreds wounded (112).

to provide an explanation for the behavior of the town inhabitants by presenting different factors that may have led them to develop an anticommunist paranoia, which ultimately resulted in the murder of the young, innocent workers that were not involved in the student movement of 1968. Cazals signals the consequences of alienating a community where the media and religious leaders are highly influential, depicting illiteracy, poverty, superstitions, and a community isolated from the rest of the country as the main reasons that led to the tragedy of San Miguel Canoa. In that way, *Canoa* is similar to *Heli*, as they both attempt to provide a background and a motive for the terrorizing events taking place in real life.

Escalante, just like Cazals, sets his film in a rural town that seems to be forgotten by the government and portrays the dangerous reality in which Mexicans live by showing how a family with no connection to the drug cartels becomes a victim of the cycle of criminal violence and the inefficiency and corruption of the social and political systems. After President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa declared war against criminal organizations on December 8th, 2006 (Aristegui Noticias), innocent people became bystanders of the harrowing images produced by the conflict and, in many occasions, were directly affected by it. Aristegui Noticias reports that, by the end of Calderón's six year government, Mexican citizens were aware of the many civilian deaths, missing persons, and kidnappings caused by the Drug War and, despite the large amounts of money spent by the Calderón administration, instead of being defeated, the criminal

organizations multiplied and the violence increased. Yet, Mexicans remained indifferent (Olivares Alonso). Escalante attempts to raise consciousness in the country's population by setting the film in a secluded location where criminals terrorize the inhabitants and the authorities are too incompetent to re-establish order and punish the culprits.

The rural town in which *Heli* takes place not only sets the film in an isolated community, but also helps create the sense of a nonexistent law system, where the people are not protected against injustice and the authorities do not punish criminals. The film further emphasizes the alienation that rural towns suffer from the federal government, as they do not progress socially and economically and the federal authorities do not intervene to stop the violence and abuse suffered by the inhabitants. Moreover, as the name of the town where the tragic events happen remains unknown, the unspecified and underdeveloped setting far-off from urbanization, from the beginning, makes the film relatable for the majority of the Mexican population³. By creating a sense of alienation and disorientation through the visual interaction between the characters and their environment, Escalante is able to represent that citizens themselves do not know the way in which the country's situation worsened. He portrays a lack of understanding in the Mexican population as to when and how Mexico became a corrupt and violent country.

³ According to the World Bank's 2014 report, 53.2% of the Mexican population lived in poverty in 2014.

Powerless Citizens and Controlling Institutions Harming the Country

In *Heli*, Escalante creates a sense of disorientation to convey the feeling of being overwhelmed that Mexican audiences feel toward their political and societal situation, expressing that Mexicans do not understand how their condition deteriorated without them noticing and do not know who is responsible for it. At the same time, Escalante uses powerful symbolism to effectively signal some of the institutions contributing to the lack of progress in the country, even when they are not the only accountable organizations. In doing so, the filmmaker first shows the cluelessness of civilians towards their current condition and then attempts to explain the upsetting reality of Mexican viewers. Escalante visually depicts the powerlessness and lack of knowledge of citizens who are abused by law enforcement officials and other organizations in the scene where Heli goes out to the wilderness to dispose of the cocaine packages that Beto hid in his rooftop. The protagonist arrives to a deserted wasteland near a forest. There is a large and deep hole in the ground with a dark bull inside; its body is partially submerged in dark waters. It is unclear how it got there, as it seems almost impossible for the animal to get in the ditch on its own. Heli stands on the edge of the hole and, with a knife, cuts the packages open and throws the content in the hole. The bull groans and moves around, as if it were uncomfortable with the invasion of its environment. Escalante seems to embody in the bull the Mexican citizens who find themselves in a metaphorical pit, trapped, with no apparent way to escape, someone invading their space, no one to save them, and no clear

explanation for how they got there in the first place.

The beginning of the film works as a prologue that further exemplifies the way in which Escalante attempts to disorient audiences and raise consciousness of their reality. The opening image is an upside-down close-up shot of a young unidentified man lying in the back of a pickup truck with other bodies. A military boot is covering half of his bloody face and he has duct tape over his mouth and around his head. Even when the anonymity of the bodies in the vehicle will be lifted as the film progresses, their preliminary lack of identity makes them generic victims of the Drug War, whose images are constantly shown on television, newspapers, and the Internet. Sontag states that the many images of tragedies and killings provided by the mass media eventually make viewers lose their capacity to react, numbing their sense of compassion after being exposed to so many depictions of graphic violence (108). Hence, as audiences are used to seeing brutal images, they become insensitive to depictions of slaughter, and the opening shot of *Heli* does not inspire a feeling of danger to them. The nameless men lying on the trunk are strangers with no connection to the viewers. Yet, Escalante allows Mexican audiences to see their own reality represented on the screen and attempts for them to better understand their environment by directly linking the scene to the violent reality that Mexicans live and witness. He depicts a group of men hanging one of the bodies in the back of the truck from a pedestrian bridge, reconstructing the violent images of dead human bodies hanged from bridges that saturate the media. While the initial lack of identity of

the bodies makes of them generic corpses, it also conveys that it is possible that anyone in the country, including viewers, could become one of the individuals lying on the trunk, showing the conflict between the government and the criminal organizations could affect anyone.

As mentioned before, the rural setting of *Heli* creates a sense of alienation that expresses how overwhelmed Mexicans feel toward the violent reality in which they live. Escalante's filming of the underdeveloped landscape through wide shots and long takes increases the authenticity of the film and makes the situations shown appear more familiar and authentic for viewers by representing their surroundings. The long shots frame the characters in relation to the environment, take audiences away from the action, do not allow them to be directly involved in the problems depicted, and increase their role as spectators. In such a way, Escalante discourages audiences' identification and attempts to create a sense of objective realism, allowing viewers to critically evaluate the situations presented and relate them to their own environment. The wide shots also emphasize the town's isolation and accentuate the enormity of the deserted landscape in comparison to the actors, juxtaposing the characters with the vast landscapes and making them look miniscule and insignificant, visually exemplifying the individual's relation to the rest of the country and government. This unimportance is shown at the beginning of the film, when a woman from INEGI (National Institute for Statistic and Geography, for its acronym in Spanish) knocks on Heli's door and asks questions about the way he and his family live,

such as how many people inhabit the house, their employment, what utilities they have, etc. For the system, people living in rural areas are nothing but a statistic. They become numbers and the government does not attempt to solve the circumstances that prevent them from having an improved life.

Escalante best produces a sense of disorientation in audiences to portray the lack of clarity of who is responsible for the violent and corrupt state of the country by not specifying who is responsible for the suffering of Heli's family, as the armed group who entered his house is never identified. Even when the soldiers come inside the dwelling and identify themselves as policemen before shooting and killing Heli's father, they all dress in dark clothes and do not wear a badge or signal that shows their affiliation to a determined group. Their vehicles are black and bear no signs that could point to the name of the organization to which they belong. When one of the armed men point a gun to Heli's face, the character has a disoriented look on his face, portraying his confusion toward the situation, as he does not comprehend who the men are and what they are looking for until they ask him about the drugs. The image further emphasizes the corruption that afflicts armed groups and, as the camera moves and shows Heli's injured father, the harsh measures they are willing to take to benefit themselves. Yet, Escalante reveals that the men and the government work together earlier in the film when a spokesman from the Federal Government gives a press conference, announcing that the administration confiscated a big amount of drugs as Beto's platoon destroys the packages with narcotics behind the

delegate. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the squad is part of the Federal or State Police, the Army, the Navy, or another armed group with ties to the law.

Later, when a big black truck with armed men inside parks in front of Heli's house, Escalante depicts that Mexicans are not sure of which are the institutions that abuse them. While the truck wears no labels that identify it as belonging to a particular military group, its anonymity suggests that it belongs to the same troop that attacked Heli's family. Escalante shows the opposition between the people and the unidentified abusive institutions by showing Heli standing in front of the truck, contrasting the enormousness of the vehicle with the character, who looks insignificant next to of such a massive menace. The shot depicts the helplessness and irrelevance of the citizens when there is an alliance between the government and criminal organizations and stresses that, in order to take actions to change the environment in which they live, they must identify which institutions contribute to making of Mexico the dangerous and incompetent country it is. Additionally, Escalante points out how the lack of branding in the truck works as a camouflage technique for law enforcement organizations working with criminals, as the ambiguity of the vehicle's identity allows them to remain unpunished.

While Escalante does not clearly state to which sector of the government the military group works for, he does clarify the state institutions that contribute to the lack of progress in the country. To do so, he uses powerful symbolism to

suggest which parts of the system continually prey on the citizens instead of benefitting them. The filmmaker first criticizes the Municipal Police, which is at Heli's house when he returns home after being tormented and left on the road by his torturers, and depicts it as an organization that fails to create a secure environment for citizens. As the police force does not intervene in any of the crimes shown in the film, such as the murder of Heli's father, the kidnapping of his sister, the torture of Heli and Beto, and Heli's own act of revenge at the end of the film, Escalante highlights the cop's inefficiency in maintaining social order and safety.

Then, Escalante signals the Federal Judicial Power as an institution unable and unwilling to bring justice to crime victims. When Heli goes to the detectives' office to testify about what happened to his family so they can find his missing sister, the investigators try to get him to sign a false statement saying that his father was part of a criminal organization. If he does not collaborate, they claim that they will not be able to move on with the case. Escalante represents the uselessness and indifference of Mexican authorities towards citizens in Heli's interaction with the police officers, as they ask him to admit to something that is not true only to benefit their reputation as detectives, not to solve the case, find Estela, and bring justice to the broken family. Later, Heli, who initially hid details of his experience out of fear of being accused of being a drug dealer, calls the female detective in charge of his case to give her all the information. They meet in her car outside of Heli's work and he tells her the entire story. Escalante shows

that, just as the police officers are unqualified, the system itself is inefficient when the investigator says that they need to open a new case file and send a petition to the judge because of the new information. The filmmaker also confirms that the authorities are both incapable and uninterested in exercising justice when the investigator changes the conversation to ask Heli how long he has been married for, pulls down her blouse to expose her breasts, and pulls him towards her, demanding him to suck on them. For a brief moment, Heli obeys and then gets out of the car. Escalante makes it clear to both the protagonist and the audience that the authorities will do nothing to help find Estela and apprehend the criminals, expressing the need for both Heli and the viewers to reform the social and political landscapes of the country.

Next, by showing Heli and his father working at a local car assembly plant, Escalante points out the prevalence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as one of the most prominent systemic failures. In 1994, when Mexico suffered an economic crisis, the government signed a treaty with the United States and Canada hoping to recover from its recession. NAFTA's policies aimed to accomplish a progressive and efficient economy by allowing foreign investment and ownership, the liberalization of manufacturing, among others (Weisbrot et al. 3). The agreement transformed the country's economy, making the export of manufacturing products the biggest source of income (De Hoyos 103). However, while NAFTA was a useful policy at the time, it proved to not be a long-term development policy since, as soon as the Mexican economy

recovered, in 2000, the manufacturing exports and wages decreased (De Hoyos 121). Weisbrot, Lefebvre, and Sammut argue that, if the economy would have continued to grow with NAFTA, Mexico would be a high income country and few citizens would seek to emigrate to the United States in search of a better life (1). Instead, unemployment and poverty increased—in 2012 the poverty rate was almost the same as in 1994 (Weisbrot et al. 1). Despite the unpromising findings published by economists, NAFTA's policies are still active and continue to have a major impact on the Mexican government and the people.

Guanajuato has become one of the main regions in Mexico preferred by foreign companies to open a manufacturing plant and, just in 2013, fifty-four corporations did so (Huerta). Hirotec Mexico, where Heli and his father work in the film according to the logo on their uniform, installed an automobile sheet metal stamper branch in that same year. During the opening ceremony, Governor Miguel Márquez Márquez mentioned, referring to the jobs that the plant would produce, “richness is the best way to fight poverty, there's no other way, and I mean the richness that comes with employment” (Rodríguez). Yet, while the factory provided more professional opportunities for the people of the state, Escalante depicts that the quality of life of the workers did not improve. On the contrary, the company pays them a small wage that does not allow them to prosper and, when Heli is unable to perform his tasks as expected after going through his traumatizing experience, they fire him. Escalante shows how, even when NAFTA allows foreign companies to invest in Mexico to create jobs,

nowadays it only perpetuates poverty instead of allowing citizens to live better, contributing to the abuse of the common man.

Another group that Escalante portrays as directly connected to the disturbing events that take place in *Heli* is the drug organization *Los Caballeros Templarios* (The Knights Templar), linking Heli's experience to the cycle of criminal violence that results from drug trafficking into the United States. When a group of gangsters torture Beto and Heli in a living room, two of the aggressors wear a stylized cross on their outfits—one as a buckle, the other stamped on the back of his shirt. The symbol, an important sign for the domestic audience, indicates the men's involvement with the cartel. Escalante's inclusion of this particular group is a significant one. First, it enhances the filmmaker's critique of neoliberal policies, as the drug industry functions according to neoliberal capitalism by exporting large amounts of narcotics into the United States and working in national areas of extreme poverty where the authorities are unable or unwilling to prevent narco-violence (Watt). Second, *Los Caballeros Templarios*'s emergence as a vigilante group, claiming that its main objective was to cleanse the region from those who preyed on local citizens before exploiting advantage of them as another source of income, highlights Escalante's critique against illegitimate groups that attempt to fight crime and violence in the country.

Los Caballeros Templarios appeared in 2006 under the name of *La Familia Michoacana* (The Michoacan Family) in the state of Michoacán, Guanajuato's southern neighbor and a strategic area for cartels due to its drug

production and transportations routes (Falko 140–141). The group succeeded at expelling Los Zetas, Mexico's most brutal criminal organization, from the state and managed to control the region until an internal rupture in 2010 gave rise to the Templarios (Falko 141). The newly born group took control of the territory and, through a public relations campaign that involved flyers, YouTube videos, and interviews, tried to accomplish a sense of legality for its criminal actions by using religious signifiers and proclaiming itself as an organization that fought those who brought poverty and insecurity to locals (Falko 142). Yet, soon after, the organization turned on civilians and engaged in activities such as kidnappings, extortions, and theft to expand their source of revenue (Falko 140). Hence, Escalante condemns vigilantism as a solution for audiences' harrowing reality and portrays it as a worst case type of scenario at the end of the film, when Heli attacks the assumed kidnapper and abuser of his sister, as vigilante groups in the country have a tendency to corrupt themselves.

Innocent Mexican Citizens Affected by Drug War Violence

As previously stated, Escalante's focus in *Heli* is to depict different ways in which criminal violence brutally affects individuals who are not part of criminal activities and young and naïve children. Los Caballeros Templarios, like other drug organizations in the country, started seeing in the inhabitants of their territory a fast source of revenue in times of war, and as such, they extort, kidnap, and steal from them. The pivotal scene that displays the way in which the aggressions created by criminal organizations affects citizens occurs when the

military breaks in Heli's home looking for the cocaine packages that Beto stole. Before the arrival of the soldiers, Escalante shows each family member peacefully spending the afternoon (except for Heli's wife, who is out of the house visiting a friend with her baby son). The sudden noise of someone hitting the front door, trying to get in the house, interrupts the family's everyday life. The soldiers barge in, kill the father, and hit Heli while asking him about the drugs. One of the cadets breaks into Estela's room and aggressively drags her from underneath her bed, where she was hiding with her little puppy. He takes the dog from Estela's arms and breaks its neck with his hands right in front of her, suggesting that the world in which the film takes place has no room for innocuous beings and foreshadowing the loss of Estela's innocence. Next, the man throws the dead puppy over Estela's bed, where it blends in with the rest of her stuffed animals. The toys on her bed, which before were a symbol of the young girl's naiveté and purity, now appear tainted by the presence of violence.

Escalante also portrays criminal groups using different ways to train children and transform them into victimizers who attack citizens. After the military invasion of Heli's home, he and his sister are forced to get in an SUV, where they reunite with Beto. The soldiers take Estela away and bring the two men to a house where a group of youth from Los Caballeros Templarios waits for them. The gangsters drag Beto and Heli into the house and push them inside a living room where a group of children is playing video games. The kids hold the controller in their hands and violently wave it in a fast motion as if it were a

sword. The character on the screen imitates the movement and aggressively attacks its opponent, foreshadowing the actions the young men and children will soon commit on Beto and Heli's bodies. When Heli and Beto are pulled into the room, the boys turn their attention towards them, but ask no questions and do nothing to stop the hostile treatment. As the aggressors accommodate the apprehended men in a corner of the room and start setting up a chain on the ceiling, the kids continue playing videogames in the back. When the men move, they reveal an old woman standing in the door frame looking at Heli and Beto. She becomes a silent spectator by not intruding or asking questions about the two young men tied up in the living room. In such a way, Escalante symbolizes in her all the bystanders of the violence and child corruption that take place in the country, whether it is by directly witnessing such aggressive scenes or watching graphic photographs or videos through the media, and who do nothing to try to reform the country. The woman's silence also suggests her powerlessness towards the men's actions, signaling citizens' hopelessness when they witness and become victims of the violence and corruption that affect the country.

Two of the gangsters, then, hang Beto by the hands to the chain in the ceiling and one of them starts beating him with a wooden board. Escalante films Beto's torture in a long take as the young man screams in pain, forcing the viewer to see what lies behind the images of hanged corpses from bridges and other explicit violent photos shown in the media, a fruit of the Drug War. Then Escalante displays the group of people witnessing Beto's torture. Heli is sitting in

a corner with duct tape over his mouth and around his head, and the children, along with one of the gangsters, drink beer, do drugs, and film the torture show as if they were watching an entertaining spectacle. Escalante shows the actions in a long shot from Beto's back, making audiences aware of the way in which each person in the room watches the young male get beat up as if it were a circus.

Moreover, Escalante displays in the scene the way in which children transition from victims of criminal violence to victimizers who abuse their fellow countrymen when the man hitting Beto offers one of the kids to continue the beating. While he refuses, the boy who was playing videogames eagerly accepts, takes the wooden board, and starts beating Beto. Escalante frames the child hitting Beto in a medium long shot with the television in the background, the videogame still playing on it. The child's movements as he waves the wooden board are similar to the ones of the animated character on the television screen. As many research studies confirm, violence in mass media influences audiences to act aggressively themselves (Berkowitz 212), therefore conveying that the child's actions are the results of an over-exposure to a combination of violent videogames and a dangerous environment. Just as Sontag states that in an atmosphere "hyper-saturated with [harrowing] images ... we become callous ... such images just make us a little less able to feel, to have our conscience pricked" (105), similarly, Escalante suggests that the amount of aggressive images available in the media ultimately desensitize viewers and encourage

them to commit similar acts. By showing the children nonchalantly watching the beating in the room, Escalante both prevents audiences from identifying with them and criticizes viewers' lack of response to the explicit images of violence circulated by the media. Moreover, since the scene is reminiscent of a kid hitting a *piñata* at a birthday party, the director ties violence to Mexican culture, meaning that the Mexican people are trained to perform merciless acts since childhood.

Escalante utilizes ultra-violence to exhort Mexican viewers to change their reality, highlighting the ultimate and most horrifying manner in which they are, or may be, affected by the inefficiency of the government and other incompetent institutions protect them and allow them to prosper. As several scholars state, violence in film is a reflection of a violent society, and it is natural for artists to want to make it a theme of their work (Bailey 81; Morgenstern 47–50). Yet, scholars such as Stephen Prince argue that film “inevitably *aestheticizes* violence” (27) and exhibits a fascination of it, turning violent acts into pleasure (32). Hence, Filmmakers who use ultra-violence to convey an anti-violence message, Prince states, must find expression in a different art form, as the medium's aesthetics inevitably produce a pleasurable response in viewers (29). Nevertheless, Escalante's intention is not to provoke a reaction against violence in audiences, but to raise awareness on the reality in which Mexicans live. Hence, he succeeds in portraying an anti-pleasurable depiction of violence by not stylizing the torture scene, framing it in a long shot with little cuts, and showing it as a mundane act witnessed by numbed children. Similarly, Susan Sontag claims

that harrowing depictions of violence portray an unjust and outrageous suffering that incites viewers to fix it, as they are proof that such horrible actions happen in real life (71). Film has the power of shocking audiences with its images and making them understand reality through its narratives (Sontag 89), and its popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, and intimate contact with the viewer make of it an art form with a great moral responsibility (Prince 17). However, Sontag states that, as compassion is an unstable feeling, it needs to be transformed into concrete action or it disappears (101). Escalante is able to transform the disturbances caused by the torture scene into an initiative to reshape the social and political issues depicted by pointing out systemic failures and portraying the ways in which citizens are abused by corrupt law enforcement agencies, an incompetent justice system, and criminal organizations.

Heli's most traumatic incident happens next when, in front of the kids, a guy pulls down Beto's pants, exposes his genitalia, sprays gasoline on it, and ignites it. As Beto moves and groans in pain, the kids continue drinking, smoking drugs, laughing in amusement around him and, instead of feeling shocked, they wonder what the guy did wrong to be punished so severely. One of the gangsters asks a boy to record a video of Beto as he twitches in pain, to later upload it to YouTube, further emphasizing the influence of a globalized world and an American influence that has contributed to the glorification of violence in the media. In such a way, Escalante criticizes the spectacles created around violence in culture, which make audiences develop an appetite for scenes of

degradation, pain, and mutilation (Sontag 97). He represents how violent images and videos desensitize audiences and later incite them to commit destructive acts, which will also be recorded and watched by new viewers, creating an endless cycle. There is then a shot of Heli, who is closing his eyes and looking away from Beto, when one of the felons tells him “*abre los ojitos para que no te pierdas el show*” (Open your little eyes so you don’t miss the show). Through this shot, Escalante directs his message to viewers who might feel offended and distressed by the explicitness of the scene, as the critics did in Cannes, and justifies his use of ultra-violence as a way to raise social consciousness by representing it as a mundane act.

In *Heli*, besides from signaling the organizations that harm citizens and prevent them from having a safer life, Amat Escalante stresses that poverty is the main cause and consequence of violence. He portrays underprivileged people who live in rural areas as forgotten by the government, living in a lawless place. Their low income and lack of opportunity make them resort to crime, as Beto did by stealing the cocaine packages with the hope that they would allow him and Estela to escape their reality. At the same time, criminals who target civilians prevent society from developing and prospering, making it almost impossible for individuals to legally climb the social ladder. Yet, Escalante, instead of providing audiences with a solution to reform the country, depicts a worst case scenario, condemning vigilantism and showing it to be the wrong answer to the problems that face the country. At the end of the film, Estela returns home on her own,

pregnant and severely traumatized. After a few days, she draws a map that signals the place where she was imprisoned. Heli, holding Estela's map on his hand, walks through a wasteland until he finds a shed in the middle of the wilderness. He identifies the little house as the place where his sister was tortured and walks to the building with a pipe in his hand as he sees a man going inside. Heli breaks in through the door, the same way as the military men did at his house. When the suspect tries to escape through a window, Heli pursues him and pushes him to the ground. Escalante frames Heli running after the individual through the window, creating a screen that does not allow audiences to partake in the action as he beats him, depicting the way in which viewers could eventually become part of the cycle of crime that Mexico is part. Thus, Escalante portrays that, by taking revenge and becoming vigilantes, Mexicans only reinforce the cyclical nature of violence and crime.

Moreover, Escalante does not depict Heli's act of revenge as a solution for the violence, corruption, and lack of justice that inhabit the country, as Heli's actions do not have an impact on the big picture or even on the trauma that Estela will continue to experience. There is not even any assurance that the man inside the shed was Estela's kidnapper. He could have just been some man who happened to be there. Hence, by previously portraying the way in which vigilante groups tend to corrupt themselves and turn on the people, Escalante criticizes citizens acting outside of the law to solve their issues. Los Caballeros Templarios is not the only organization who claimed to be working to establish social order

and security before turning on the people. In 2013, the criminal group encountered groups of armed civilians who had been victims of the organized crime and dedicated their existence to cleansing of the territory from members of Los Caballeros Templarios (Falko 146). While, at the beginning, the militia groups from Michoacán succeeded in expelling felons from the region, it did not take long for the organization to become infiltrated by members of the organized crime who then continued abusing citizens. Thus, Escalante prompts viewers to reform the environment in which they live not by proposing a solution, but by opening their eyes to their reality. He attempts to take them out of their disoriented state by signaling the organizations that oppress them, using ultra-violence to highlight the depth of the problem and the importance of reforming the country.

Finally, besides from raising awareness on Mexicans and inviting them to reflect on their country by depicting innocents affected by the drug conflict, Escalante also portrays the innocence of children as the reason why it is important to find a solution and take transformative action. The last scene of the film shows Estela, who has a new life growing inside her, together with her infant nephew peacefully sleeping on a couch. The slow movement of the curtains and the bright light coming in through the windows highlight the kids' virtuousness and reinforce Escalante's vision, as it portrays children as the ones in which the hope for a better country resides.

CHAPTER TWO

REAL NARRATIVES:

CORRUPTION AND VIOLENCE IN GERARDO NARANJO'S *MISS BALA*

The Mexican government's inability to protect its inhabitants has made Mexico a place where fear has become part of everyday life. Since 2003, Mexicans have lived in the middle of a war between drug organizations for the control of territories and drug routes and, when President Felipe Calderon attempted to stop narco-violence and crime by declaring war against drug cartels in December 2006, the battlefield and the bloodshed only moved closer to the people (Kellner and Pipitone 31–32). Civilians soon became one of the main sources of revenue for cartels, which started extorting and kidnapping citizens for ransom (Falko 140; Kellner and Pipitone 33). Likewise, new media technologies, such as television and the internet, allow viewers to consume violence nonstop (Sontag 108), bringing the conflict closer to all Mexicans, including those who did not live in a violent environment or had not experienced tragedy by the hands of a drug organization, creating a persistent state of terror even in those not directly affected by the conflict. Any citizen, regardless of their socioeconomic status, became a potential victim in the cycle of criminal violence produced by the confrontation against drug trafficking into the United States, generating a fear of leaving one's home because "everything is rotting and out of control" (Rotker 16). Gerardo Naranjo's 2011 film *Miss Bala* successfully conveys the reasons Mexicans have to be afraid of their present reality, as both the government and

drug cartels are capable of utilizing the people as worthless objects in their battle for power and anyone could become collateral damage.

In *Miss Bala*, Laura, a 23 year old girl who lives in a low-income household and dreams of becoming a beauty queen, suddenly finds herself actively involved in the struggle between a drug cartel and the police. After registering for the beauty pageant Miss Baja California, she and her friend, Suzu, go to the Millennium Night Club, where Laura has a brief interaction with the members of La Estrella, a dangerous criminal organization, which then starts shooting up the place. Laura manages to escape, but Suzu gets lost in the middle of the action. The day after, Laura asks a transit officer for help in finding her friend, but when he finds out that she witnessed the massacre, he instead takes her to Lino, the leader of La Estrella. The gangster terrorizes Laura's brother and father and makes her assist in the group's criminal activities, forcing her to drive a car with dead bodies inside, transport money to the United States and smuggle weapons to Mexico on the way back. As a reward, Lino uses his influences and reputation as a cartel leader to make Laura the winner of the Miss Baja California contest. After her arranged victory, La Estrella uses Laura's new status as a beauty queen and instructs her to seduce a military general during a cocktail party. Yet, when Laura reads in a newspaper that Suzu was one of the dead bodies inside the car she drove for the group, she switches sides and warns the general of Lino's plan. At the end of the attack, Laura, hidden, observes Lino put his clothes on a fallen man while wearing a PGR (Attorney General of the Republic, for its

acronym in Spanish) life vest. Before leaving, he has a brief talk with the general, which signals their collaboration. The general's men then capture Laura, assault her, and parade her as a member of La Estrella on a press conference where they—falsely—report Lino's death and the capture of several men belonging to the organization. At the end, the soldiers put Laura in a vehicle and transport her to an unknown location.

As a subjective reflection of reality, film has the ability to offer an explanation and portray the elements affecting society in order to stimulate audiences to reform the world they inhabit (Morgenstern 50). As explained in the Introduction, violence in Mexico has inspired filmmakers since the inception of the medium in the country because “violent movies are an inevitable consequence of violent life” (Morgenstern 47). Nowadays, in the midst of a drug war that has left approximately 164,000 dead only between 2007 and 2014 (Breslow), several films have been produced as a response to the violence experienced by civilians and the government's inability to restore peace. In *Miss Bala*, Gerardo Naranjo seeks to represent narco-generated violence from the perspective of someone who becomes a victim of it without glorifying the battle or action sequences, emphasizing the corruption in government institutions and the organizations that prevent the country from becoming a nonviolent place (Calvo). Naranjo's use of the docudrama genre, which are films based on or inspired by reality that portray a story with high accuracy and honesty (Rosenthal 16–7), increases the authenticity of the film. Naranjo's fictionalization of real life events

highlights the reasons that maintain citizens in a constant state of fear and inspires audiences to take transformative actions to change the country, as creating a credible narrative inspires viewers to act (Rotker 17).

Naranjo depicts the horrors that citizens find themselves in during the Drug War, in which both the police and drug cartels regard the people as objects and use them for their own benefit. Yet, as it is impossible to create a survival guide against violence (Calvo), Naranjo never portrays a solution to restore peace in the country and end corruption. In this chapter, I discuss the methods that Gerardo Naranjo employs to raise awareness in Mexican viewers on the way they could become collateral damage or get unintentionally involved in crime in the battle between the government and illicit organizations. First, I describe the real life events and known scandals in which the film is based on and which serve as a way of increasing authenticity and create consciousness on the collaboration between criminals and the government. Then, I talk about the different conceptions of the urban poor in Mexican cinema throughout the years. Next, I examine Naranjo's depiction of a continuous feeling of despair, fear, disorientation, and powerlessness without offering, in any moment, a hint of hope for the protagonist, a happy conclusion for the film, or a solution to fix the country. Finally, I illustrate the way in which Naranjo depicts the alliance between criminal and police institutions and his limited use of on-screen explicit violence, through which he increases the feeling of helplessness and stresses the need for audiences to reshape the country to stop becoming collateral damage in the

government's struggle to stop drug cartel's operations on national territory.

Using Real Life Events to Bring Reality Closer to Viewers

Since the beginning of time, in every civilization, there have been conflicts and wars, making of violence an intrinsic element of the human fabric (Valenti 63–64). Hence, art has always represented the violence that surrounds the human condition, and nowadays the film medium contributes in the imitation and exploration of the struggles in the world (Bailey 81). While, for a time, violence in film was censored because it was believed that it inspired aggressive behavior in audiences (Prince 2), the medium became more explicit after the political assassinations of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the period's general social turbulence (Prince 8). The film screen began to reflect what television and newspaper photographs were already showing by portraying the disturbing events of the world (Sontag 21), bringing them closer to viewers who either did not know they existed or simply preferred to ignore them (Sontag 7). In a society where violence increases every day, filmic representation must become more graphic and no crimes should be left unrepresented (McKinney 102). Likewise, filmmakers have used the medium to try to raise awareness in viewers on the world violence, as seeing real life through fiction allows viewers to better appreciate and comprehend it (Gutiérrez Alea 32–3). Yet, to inspire a reaction it is necessary for the film to address specific concerns and raise questions in viewers (Gutiérrez Alea 41). Naranjo manages to do so by mixing real events with fiction, modifying them to highlight the corrupt relationship between police

officers and criminal organizations, while creating a sense of powerlessness and pessimism that makes one wonder if there is any hope to fix the country.

Susan Sontag establishes that, even when graphic images of war and violence attack viewers' sensibilities (45), an overexposure to them makes spectators become used to the horrors depicted, both in real life and in their representations (83). Yet, viewers do not become numb to the images themselves, but they stop reacting to them when the issues depicted seem unsolvable, "The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration" (Sontag 101–2). A similar situation happens with Mexicans, as most of citizens remain indifferent to the amount of death and violence that surrounds them (Olivares Alonso); the overwhelming situation causes in them a feeling of hopelessness and prevents them from being motivated to act and reform the social and political landscapes of the country. Yet, narratives make harrowing depictions of violence affecting viewers by forcing them to understand the situations that led to the horrors represented (Sontag 89). In order to induce viewers to take transformative actions, films must not allow spectators to escape real life; they must collaborate with the factors that create that reality to encourage them to fix their environment (Gutiérrez Alea 39). Hence, socially conscious film must leave "an audience feeling dead inside, yet, somehow, more alive than it was two hours before" (McKinney 102). In *Miss Bala*, just as Naranjo shows the corruption that inhabits police institutions, he stresses that anyone, voluntarily or not, could get involved

with organized crime, creating a feeling of paranoia and anxiety that leaves spectators feeling powerless toward their environment, as there is no one to trust and anyone could have links with criminals.

Naranjo seeks to raise awareness of the country's situation by depicting, from the point of view of someone affected by it, the possibilities that Mexicans have of becoming collateral damage of the violence created by the Drug War and the police corruption. Yet, Stephen Prince argues that it is impossible for filmmakers to convey an anti-violence message, as the medium naturally aestheticizes violence and viewers may have various reactions to the events represented (32). Nevertheless, telling a subjective story based on reality, with which people can empathize, makes it possible to create an understanding of the horrors of life (Rotker 8), as "pathos, in the form of narrative, does not wear out" (Sontag 83). Naranjo manages to make *Miss Bala* relevant for audiences and increase its authenticity by setting the film in present time Tijuana, a frontier city in the state of Baja California Norte commonly affected by battles between drug cartels, and incorporating real police cases and scandals known to Mexican audiences. In such a way, viewers identify the events on the screen and relate them to their own lives, intensifying the film's sense of realism and creating social consciousness of the insecurity and corruptness of world they inhabit.

Asides from setting *Miss Bala* in the present, offering statistics about the number of deaths, and portraying the consequences that the Drug War brings to citizens, Naranjo takes two real narco-related cases and dramatizes them to

make the film more relatable to Mexican spectators. The first one, on which *Miss Bala*'s main story and the protagonist are based, is the scandal of Laura Zúñiga Huizar, Miss Sinaloa 2008, who was captured at the end of that same year along with members of the Juárez Cartel, who were in possession of firearms and a large amount of dollars in Jalisco (*El Universal*). The beauty queen was detained along with her then-boyfriend, Ángel Orlando García Urquiza, one of the cartel leaders, and argued that she was not aware of her partner's illicit activities. According to the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*, at the time of her capture, Zúñiga Huizar explained that she and her companions were planning to go shopping in Bolivia and Colombia, but later changed her statement and assured that she had been kidnapped by the group and feared for her safety. Naranjo includes several similarities between the protagonist and Zúñiga Huizar to increase the legitimacy of his work and heighten viewer's relatability to the narrative. For instance, the protagonist and Zúñiga Huizar not only share their first name, but both are also tall, slender, and brunette beauty queens who, according to the media, have links with criminal organizations. Their clothes during their victories at the beauty pageant and when they are presented as criminals at the press conference are also alike—both are wearing a low-back yellow dress with a belt-like ornament around the waist on the first occasion, and a grey sweatshirt in the second one. Yet, while *Miss Bala* may seem to justify Zúñiga Huizar's alleged innocence, Naranjo solely utilizes her well-known story to force viewers to identify with a real-life person who was suspected of having

criminal ties. In that way, he makes spectators question how one could find themselves being accused of belonging to a criminal group that they are not a part of.

The second case that Naranjo includes in *Miss Bala*'s narrative is that of an American agent brutally murdered by the Guadalajara Cartel in 1985. Enrique "Kiki" Camarena Salazar, an undercover agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) who infiltrated the criminal organization at the beginning of the 1980s, was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered after the police destroyed one of the Cartel's largest operations of illegal exportation of marijuana to the United States (*El Universal*). After the discovery of his body one month after his disappearance, the DEA treated the agent as a fallen hero and pressured the Mexican government into finding and arresting the culprits for the murder (*The Economist*). Nowadays, Camarena is still regarded as "the best-known hero of the war on drugs" (Hunter) and continues to inspire other DEA agents who try to stop Mexican cartels from exporting drugs to the United States. In *Miss Bala*, Naranjo references Camarena by showing Lino order the kidnapping and murder of a DEA agent, "Kike" Cámara, who confiscated Laura's cellphone and orchestrated an attack that largely damaged the criminal organization. Naranjo's inclusion of Camarena's assassination serves to expose the relationship of criminals with Mexican police officers and to portray the DEA as the true enemy of the cartels, as the agents are willing to die for the cause instead of cooperating with illicit organizations.

Nevertheless, even though Naranjo depicts the DEA as an incorruptible agency and the biggest threat for drug cartels, he does not represent it as the solution to end with the exporting of drugs across the border or proliferation of drug violence. The film has no happy conclusion, as that would make audiences leave the theater feeling that everything is right in the world and it is unnecessary for them to do something to fix it (Gutiérrez Alea 38). Instead, Naranjo utilizes Camarena's murder to reveal the true power of the drug organizations over the DEA, as Lino finds and kills Kike Cámara despite the fact that the agent was planning on capturing him. At the same time, *Miss Bala* shows that police forces, including the DEA, pay little attention to civilians who become collateral damage in the fight against organized crime. For instance, when Cámara takes Laura's cellphone, he does not ask about her involvement with La Estrella or offers her protection. Instead, he just tells her to go home. He only used her to obtain the phone to ambush the cartel. In such a way, Naranjo creates an understanding of the world in which Mexicans live by representing how the relationship between cartels and the police damages civilians by adapting reality to the screen and setting the film in one of the country's most violent cities.

The Urban Poor as Victims and Victimizers

The poor living in the city have been associated with violence since the birth of the Mexican film industry. Depending on the period, the underprivileged are either noble, kindhearted dreamers who live amidst violence and misfortune, violent victimizers who terrorize their peers due to being trapped in their

socioeconomic status, or hard working individuals with hopes and dreams who are abused by the authorities and criminals. In Ismael Rodríguez's *Nosotros los Pobres* (*We the Poor*, 1947), the biggest box-office success during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema and an all-time favorite that still plays in movie houses and television (Mora 80), the urban poor are romantics who suffer tragedy after tragedy while singing about love and making innocent jokes about the world. Despite the musical numbers and comedy, the melodramatic film creates a sense of realism by utilizing street dialogue from the outskirts of Mexico City and portraying the violence and despair that naturally come with poverty, portraying it as a hellish condition regardless of the humble and tenderhearted people (Mora 80). The plot, long and complicated, shows how Pepe el Toro, a romantic, honest, sympathetic, and hard-working carpenter, seems cursed with poverty and the numerous catastrophes accompanying it. In spite of his efforts to provide for his niece and mother, Pepe suffers from, among other adversities, the theft of four hundred pesos he needed to buy work materials, the assault on his paralytic mother that led to her death, and his unfair imprisonment.

Gustavo García states that melodramas utilize the setting and its cultural associations to aid in the development of characters' personalities and behaviors (156). From the start, *Nosotros los Pobres*, set in a *vecindad* (a type of neighborhood inhabited by the urban poor), suggests that the characters live in a caring community; they are poor but honorable working people who try to survive with the help of one another (García 156–157). Nevertheless, as the

setting also associates the residents of the *vecindad* with cruelty and violence, Rodríguez portrays the hardships and injustices faced by the poor. In the middle of the film, a man dazed with marijuana brutally beats Pepe's paralyzed mother in a scene that portrays both his frantic need to hurt her and her inability to defend herself. Later, when Pepe is in prison, he gets in a fight with the men who framed him and viscerally gouges out one of their eyes in a scene that does not turn away from the man's suffering. Yet, Rodríguez frames the violence and despair with romantic songs and comedy, and the film, instead of raising awareness of poverty, contributes to a pre-established social status of the deprived. Rodríguez's idealization of the poor by portraying them as sympathetic and noble individuals who are victims of their economic status contributes to *Nosotros los Pobres's* everlasting fame, as it posits an equilibrium between good intentions and lack of money with which the majority of the Mexicans can identify (Monsiváis 123–124). The nobility of the characters serves to reinforce the ideology of the state, a characteristic of most Mexican productions of the time (Lewkowicz 168), showing the poor at the bottom of the hierarchy, and not conveying the need to transform one's reality by romanticizing characters living under appalling conditions. The film's happy ending, in which the authorities learn of Pepe's innocence and release him from jail, allowing him to marry his sweetheart, further supports the idealized status quo and does not inspire in viewers the need to reform the country.

The sentimentalized image of the urban poor changed in 1950, with Luis

Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (*The Young and the Damned*). Buñuel, shocked by the suffering and despair in which many Mexicans lived, aimed to realistically represent the conditions in which the poor children subsisted, demystifying the romanticized portrayal of the poor in the Golden Age of Mexican cinema (Mora 91). The film begins showing images of big cities, such as New York and Paris, while a voiceover narrates that modern capitals hide homes of misery where malnourished and uneducated children grow up to become delinquents. Mexico, the narrator says, is no exception to this universal rule, and proceeds to show the visceral and tragic story of a group of kids living in a slum in Mexico City. Jaibo, a juvenile delinquent, escapes jail and goes back to leading his gang. With the help of Pedro, one of the boys in the band, Jaibo attacks and kills Julián, the young man who he believes betrayed him. Jaibo takes Julian's money and gives some of it to Pedro, making him an accomplice of the crime and preventing him from talking to the police. Upset by his mother's rejection and lack of love, Pedro finds a job as a blacksmith's apprentice to earn her affection. One day, Jaibo comes to the workshop to talk to him about Julian's murder and, without Pedro noticing, steals a valuable knife. The blacksmith accuses Pedro of stealing and sends him to a juvenile rehabilitation program. There, the principal, believing that Pedro could turn into an honest and hardworking person, gives him 50 pesos to run some errands. On the way, Pedro encounters Jaibo, who steals the money. Pedro pursues him and, in the middle of a fight, announces to the bystanders that Jaibo killed Julian. At the end, Jaibo murders Pedro in a barn and flees, but

the police find him and shoot him to death. A young girl and her grandfather, the owners of the barn, find Pedro's body and, afraid of being accused, decide to dump his corpse off a cliff.

Asides from Pedro and Jaibo's storyline, there are other subplots that show the cruel conditions in which the poor lived during the leadership of President Miguel Alemán Valdés, characterized for its developmental reforms that heralded unprecedented economic expansion and prosperity (Mora 75). Buñuel depicts an underground world that, besides from being full of crime and violence, contains mothers who do not love their children, raped women, old men who try to abuse young girls, abandoned children, and many other afflictions. For instance, a young boy is abandoned by his father and enters the service of a blind man who tries to assault a girl, Julian's dad constantly grieves for his murdered son and drunkenly talks about the crime, and Pedro's mother reveals she does not love her son because he is the product of rape. Hence, *Los Olvidados* contradicts the ideology of Alemán's government by focusing on a group of young kids, living in the most modern city in the country, whose behavior is brutal and primitive. Despite being set in Mexico City, the neighborhood where the kids live—a *vecindad* similar to the one in *Nosotros los Pobres*—is an underdeveloped, unclean, and chaotic place filled with both hard working people and criminals; a site where there seems to be no law, and the union and support of the community is nonexistent. The gangsters prey on those who work hard, such as when Jaibo stole the knife and Pedro's money,

preventing them from working for a better future, creating a feeling of despair and hopelessness.

Los Olvidados, based on real life, urges the progressive forces of society—a phrase commonly used during Alemán's government—to find a solution to the poverty that forces children to become criminals by showing a pessimistic but realistic portrayal of reality, where the young are merciless delinquents who victimize their peers. Buñuel's breaking of the nationalistic image of Mexico and the romanticism with which the poor were depicted during the Golden Age created an unsettling film for audiences accustomed to a sentimentalized image of the poor (Mora 91). Furthermore, the filmmaker's use of a neorealist aesthetic, filming on-location the lives of the underprivileged with natural light and wide shots, increases the film's sense of authenticity and highlights the horrors depicted on the screen. While *Nosotros los Pobres* does not inspire change by having a happy ending and framing the violence and the repulsions of the city between songs and jokes, *Los Olvidados's* documentary aesthetic and pessimistic conclusion open the eyes of the viewers toward their reality. It raises consciousness in viewers of the fact that there are still poor men and women living in the country, in the cities, and that they are not humble and hardworking romantics, but vicious and violent young men who hinder the development of society and the country. Just as Pedro is unable to earn the affection of his mother, the men and women in the film are unable to progress in their apathetic country.

Miss Bala's urban setting, just like that of *Los Olvidados* and *Nosotros los Pobres*, increases the film's authenticity. In 2008, Tijuana, a border city already well known for its high crime rate, became ultra-violent when the Tijuana and Sinaloa Cartels started fighting over its control (Ambrus). As a result, the kidnapping and murder rates are increased and businesses such as boutiques, bars, and restaurants began to close down (Ambrus), showing how the conflict between criminal organizations instills terror in civilians and impoverishes them. Yet, Naranjo's conventional use of the melodrama prevents the film from directly linking poverty and narco-violence. *Miss Bala* depicts the poor in the city as naïve and defenseless, with no one to protect them from the menaces that surround them. The film focuses on Laura and her hardworking family, who became involved with the Drug War not out of need, but by chance. As Laura was in the wrong place at the wrong time when she initially encountered Lino, Naranjo shows that her socio-economic status was not a cause of the disturbing events that she goes through.

Nevertheless, Naranjo is able to point out that poverty is the one of the main causes and consequences of crime when Laura is in a taxi on her way to take Lino's money to the United States. The taxi driver who is driving her to the airport tells her that, if the police catch her, she must not say that he is involved with Lino's group because he has a family to take care of. That is, he collaborates with La Estrella because of economic needs. Without any opportunities for a job that allows them to earn a steady income, people are

forced to resort to crime to survive. Since Naranjo represents that anyone could have connections with criminal organizations, as “a poor person [is] often represented ... as a criminal” (Rotker 8), the scene creates a feeling of paranoia in audiences and distrust in everyone who surrounds them. At the same time, crime is an important cause of poverty, as felons take advantage of the town’s folk, do not allow civilians to progress, and create an unsafe environment around them. Hence, poverty and crime are part of a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle.

Unlike the characters from *Nosotros los Pobles* and *Los Olvidados*, Laura and her family do not live in a *vecindad*. Their house is located in the outskirts of Tijuana. In such a way, Naranjo visually suggests that Mexicans are on their own when facing the dangers that surround them, as not only do the authorities fail to protect them from criminals, but they also abuse and exploit them, making them insignificant pawns in the fight against the drug cartels. At the beginning of the film, Laura’s little brother is folding clothes and putting them inside bags that her father then loads on a truck; the entire family collaborates to financially support themselves. They work hard in the hope of having a better future. Yet, once Lino and his group arrive at Laura’s house in the middle of the night, she, her father, and her brother are unable to do anything to prevent the criminals from terrorizing them, using their household as their headquarters, and Laura as a money-mule. Hence, Laura and her family represent the majority of Mexicans who struggle to provide for their kin and are victims of the violence afflicting the country. Even when most of *Miss Bala* is not explicitly violent—except for the

shooting under the bridge after Laura comes back from across the border—because Naranjo aims to disorient viewers by not allowing them to see everything and so as not to glorify the war, he does portray how Mexicans are taken advantage of by criminals and police officers.

The Viewer as an Accomplice of Crime

Throughout *Miss Bala*, Naranjo creates a sense of disorientation, fear, and despair in audiences to convey the overwhelming situation in which Mexicans live, stressing that both criminals and police institutions are capable of exploiting civilians with no regard for their safety. Naranjo visually represents citizens' desperation and disorientation towards their treacherous environment by blurring images, keeping objects and characters out of focus, and utilizing long takes, often moving the camera's gaze away from the action, violence, and bloodshed in the fighting sequences. Naranjo's constant use of blurred images not only serves to keep audiences confused about the events transpiring and conceal characters' identities throughout the film, but also represents the shadiness and corruption of the country as well as the lack of clarity on the future if the cycle of criminal violence continues. Additionally, the film's multiple long takes create a feeling of suspense as the narrative progresses and also creates a sense of uneasiness in spectators as Naranjo highlights the corrupt relationship between police institutions and criminal organizations. In such a way, Naranjo raises awareness of the harrowing potential future of the country if the issues portrayed are not resolved, inspiring viewers to find solutions to reform the country's

political landscape. Mexicans' feelings of powerlessness are expressed visually in an overview shot of Laura changing her clothes at the Millennium Night Club. She appears as if she were trapped in the dark by the walls, making it seem as if she were imprisoned in an obscure hole with no apparent way of escaping. The shot foreshadows the events that will unfold in a narrative, as Laura will be kept captive in a somber and violent situation from which it will be impossible to escape, and also represents the world in which Mexicans live: a dark place with no apparent way of escaping.

Laura's first interactions with Lino exemplify Mexicans' distress and denial toward their situation and the way in which they begin to recognize the dangers that surround them as the cycle of criminal violence begins to affect them. Naranjo maintains Lino's face hidden for a long time, either blurring it, keeping it out of the frame, or hiding it in shadows throughout different scenes. His anonymity stresses that anyone could become him, as the country's lack of professional opportunities encourages people to become criminals as a way to survive and gain success and power in an illicit organization. When Lino infiltrates the night club, he begins to check every privy in the bathroom to see if anyone is in there. Laura notices him and hides in one corner of the restroom. As Lino approaches her, the camera shows only Laura sitting on the floor and Lino standing in front of her holding a rifle; his face remains hidden. As the camera is positioned at a low angle, showing only his legs, the only thing portraying that the character is a criminal is his weapon. Lino wears ordinary clothes, instead of the

extravagant attires that wealthy Mexican criminals have been associated with, such as pointy boots, hats, colorful cowboy shirts, and extravagant jewelry. Naranjo does not portray narcos as stereotypical characters, as Beto Gómez and Luis Estrada do in *Salvando al Soldado Pérez* (Saving Private Perez, 2011) and *El Infierno* (Hell, 2010), respectively. Instead, he shows them wearing ordinary clothes—jeans, casual shirts, caps, and combat boots or sport shoes,—depicting them as common men and making audiences relate to them because of their simple outfits.

The first time audiences are able to clearly see Lino's face is after he takes Laura to the headquarters of the Miss Baja California pageant to enter her in the competition. His face appears in full focus as he gives her money to buy a dress. Then, Naranjo shows Lino's face in a close up shot when the criminal proceeds to touch Laura's inner thighs. The sharpness of the image matches the moment when Laura acknowledges Lino as a menace to herself, as someone who will use her to his own benefit and pleasure instead of helping her find Suzu. As Lino is starring directly into the camera while he touches Laura, as if he were looking audiences in the eye, Naranjo makes viewers identify with her and feel threatened by him. In such a way, Naranjo is able to create a feeling of helplessness and despair in viewers on the way in which criminals abuse and utilize them without the intervention of the authorities.

Naranjo facilitates audiences' identification with Laura by employing a Cinderella story, the classic telenovela plot (Lewkowicz 268), as a narrative

design to allow viewers to relate to the protagonist. In such a way, *Miss Bala*'s narrative scheme resembles the plot of many successful Mexican telenovelas, such as *Los Ricos También Lloran* (*The Rich also Cry*, Televisa, 1979–1980) and *María Mercedes* (1992–1993), which make viewers empathize with the underprivileged characters who accomplish their goals not through hard work and personal initiative, but with the help of a powerful man who sexually desires them (Lewkowicz 268). Nonetheless, Naranjo alters the genre's rules, changing Laura's dream into a nightmare from which she cannot escape, portraying her as a victim of the abuse of criminal organizations and police institutions. Laura is a common girl with aspirations of achieving a better social status by becoming a beauty queen. Her aspirations are shown from the start in the opening shot that displays a collage of magazine clippings of beauty divas, such as Madonna, Shakira, and Marilyn Monroe on a bedroom wall. Later, when Laura and Suzu arrive to the auditions for the beauty pageant, Naranjo emphasizes that Laura represents all Mexicans who want to progress—despite being victims of violence and crime—through a tracking shot of the long line of young women waiting for their turn to audition. They all want to use their beauty to become wealthy and appreciated. Yet, every girl there looks a lot more stylish and careful about her appearance than Laura, who is not even wearing a dress. Laura's image does not portray her ambitions, as she does not wear makeup, fashionable clothes, and her hair is not stylized. Thus, when she goes to the audition for the beauty pageant and says "*Mi sueño es representar la belleza de la mujer de mi estado*"

(My dream is to represent the beauty of the woman of my state), her looks contradict her words. Her beauty is average and her posture does not express her determination. The woman in charge of the casting not only stresses the protagonist's similarity to a Cinderella archetype by calling her out on not taking care of her fingernails and claiming that she looks like a maid, but also reveals the inconsistencies in her character.

Laura's behavioral contradictions depict her oppositional identity, as Naranjo portrays her as both Laura Guerrero, a common girl who becomes a victim of organized crime, and Miss Bala, an accomplice. This duality is visually expressed from the beginning, as the first time viewers see Laura's face is when the title of the film appears over her head as she turns toward the camera while Suzu is calling her name. Before, her face was blurred, covered by objects, or the camera was filming her from behind, concealing her identity. The filmmaker depicts how criminals and the government exploit citizens through Laura's story of manipulation and victimization, suggesting that anyone could be in her situation by often filming the protagonist from behind. At the same time, Naranjo expresses that viewers, just as Laura, are both victims and accomplices of drug cartels and police institutions. This is best expressed when Lino shows up at Laura's house in the middle of the night. Before the criminal's arrival, Laura sits in front of a television. A reporter is talking about the car left at the American embassy—which Laura drove—as she takes out the money Lino gave her, a symbol of her complicity, and puts it in the trash, as if she refused to be an

accessory to crime. Then she takes it out and keeps it, as if she agreed to be the cartel's accomplice in exchange for the money, just as the taxi driver who took her to the airport. When Lino shows up, limping and armed, Laura tells her brother and father to hide in their room. She and Lino go to her room. He puts his weapons on her bed and sits down. Even though he is wounded and disarmed, neither Laura nor her family tries to call anyone for help. They are both powerless toward crime and, at the same time, complicit with the criminals by not trying to defend themselves or calling the authorities. Naranjo conveys that everyone is complicit with organized crime in one way or the other, as being aware of the corruption and violence and not seeking a solution makes citizens collaborators. Laura cooperates with Lino when she kneels down in front of him and starts wrapping bandages around his wounded leg, positioning herself in a vulnerable position. Thus, because of her links with drug cartels, once Laura wins the beauty pageant, she is not the representation of the beauty of the women in her state, but the face of the success and power of corruption and crime.

Condemning Violence and Corruption

Stephen Prince claims that violence is tied to cinema's visceral properties (2), and as such the medium is unable to represent violence as a non-pleasurable experience, which may cause serious social consequences, such as promoting aggressive behavior in audiences (27). Yet, even when *Miss Bala* portrays some of the violence that affects Mexico, Naranjo turns the camera away from the violent acts that take place in the narrative, such as shootings,

executions, and rape. Instead, he focuses on highlighting the relationship between police institutions and criminal organizations and the way in which civilians are worthless objects used for the benefit of each institution. For instance, in the shootings at the Millennium Night Club and the hotel room at the beginning and the end of the film, respectively, the camera only depicts the lifeless bodies on the floor as Laura crawls to safety or hides from the battle, instead of showing human bodies getting hit by bullets and the gunfire between both sides.

The only time Naranjo explicitly shows the battle between the government and the criminal groups is when Laura comes back from the United States, transporting a large amount of guns and ammunition across the border in an SUV. She arrives to the bridge where she is supposed to meet Lino's group and encounters a group of police cars blocking a street. They immediately start shooting towards her. The camera follows her as she gets down in the car and hides from the bullets, not showing the events taking place on the outside of the vehicle. Then, there is a cut to the outside, where some of the criminals run from the gunfire and shoot back at the police as one of Lino's men rescues Laura from the SUV. As she runs to safety, Naranjo shows the violent, bloody, and dangerous battleground inhabited by Mexicans, where they could easily become collateral damage of the Drug War. Naranjo emphasizes the horrors taking place in the combat zone, such as a man convulsing on the ground and others succumbing to gunfire, in a long take that increases the authenticity of the action,

damning the violence instead of glorifying it. As images of disfigured bodies bring the threat of the violent reality close to those who have not found themselves in such a distressing situation (Sontag 11–2), Naranjo is able to raise awareness on the violence that has taken over the country.

Throughout the film, Naranjo highlights the collaboration between authorities and criminals to intensify the feeling of powerlessness in viewers, making them believe that there is no solution for the country's plight, as those who are supposed to protect them instead abuse them. Hence, Naranjo raises awareness on the governmental corruption⁴ and the way in which the government exploits citizens in two specific scenes. The first is when Laura asks a transit officer for help and the second when she tells a military general about Lino's plan to massacre him and his platoon. After the shooting at the night club, Laura seeks help from a transit officer in finding Suzu. When she mentions that she was at the night club during the shooting, the officer seems reluctant to help, but then asks her to get in the car and tell him what happened. Once she reveals that she saw men with guns putting three dead bodies in a car, the policeman starts driving and uses his radio to communicate with someone using codes that prevent Laura and the audience from comprehending. The officer tells Laura that he will take her to the bureau so that she can tell the policemen what she saw, but instead stops at an unknown location and exits the car, allowing a group of

⁴ According to Transparency International, in 2010 Mexico was perceived as one of the most corrupt countries in the world by the public sector. Five years later, in 2015, not much has changed, the country was again ranked as one of the world's most corrupt nations in government, politics, business, and banking (Estevez).

men to forcefully take Laura out of the vehicle and put her inside a black, unidentified van. The transit officer then returns, closes the passenger's door, where Laura was extracted, and gets back into his car without confronting the men, showing his complicity with the kidnappers. Despite working for the government, he serves and protects criminals, not the people. In such a way, Naranjo, from the start, shows the corruption of the country and the way in which cartels buy the loyalty and protection of the police, who then become complicit with the violence and exploitation.

The second most noticeable instance of corruption happens at the climax of the film, in the confrontation between the military and Lino's organization in a hotel. The day after winning the beauty pageant, Lino's men drive Laura to a breakfast party and instruct her to flirt with a general to get an invitation to his hotel room and then notify them when she is alone with him. However, at the gathering, Laura finds out that Suzu was one of the bodies that she drove to the American embassy by orders of Lino. At this moment, viewers comprehend that Laura had just been an object used by the cartel in its fight against the government. Lino never tried to help her, as he claimed, but instead he made her betray her fellow citizens and contribute to their misfortunes. After reading the news, Laura becomes aware of her power to escape and confront the criminal organization by telling the general about Lino's plan, refusing to remain complicit with the criminal group. After she does so, the general hides in the bathroom, orders some of his men to hide in the room, armed, and tells Laura to get in the

bed. He uses her as bait and puts her in a dangerous position instead of protecting her, showing how authorities, just like cartels, use civilians for their benefit. After the violent confrontation inside the room, Laura, hiding under the bed, sees Lino walking inside the room and putting his jacket and cap on a dead body; he is wearing a bulletproof vest from the government. Then, from Laura's perspective, audiences see Lino's feet walking and meeting the general's. Lino tells to the military leader, "*Ahí está, le dejo todo puesto*" (There it is, I leave everything set for you), revealing his involvement with the general and conveying that corruption exists in all levels of the law, from the bottom, with transit officers, to the very top, with army generals. In such a way, Naranjo creates awareness of the fact that any individual working with the authorities may be involved with drug organizations and, most importantly, that they do not respect civilians' lives. They only cherish their own personal growth and power in the political hierarchy.

Even when Naranjo urges viewers to seek solutions and take transformative actions to reform Mexico, he depicts that any resolution must not include the authorities, as many of them have links with drug organizations. The filmmaker creates a sense of paranoia by showing that the authorities cannot be trusted, as they are part of the problem by collaborating with criminals. Once Lino leaves the hotel room, military soldiers drag Laura from underneath the bed, and brutally beat her up in the hallway. They take her to an unknown location where they place her in front of a large arsenal of weapons and present her, together with men belonging to Lino's group, as one of the individuals arrested in the

shooting at the hotel room. The main speaker says that an operation of the PGR, together with the state and municipal police, succeeded in dealing with the criminal group and killing Lino, which is untrue, as he escaped by striking a deal with the general. When they talk about Laura, they refer to her as Miss Baja California, the woman who drove the car containing three dead bodies to the American consulate. In such a way, Naranjo portrays how police institutions disregard on the lives of civilians and only care about their own power and elevated position in society. Both criminal organizations and the government utilize citizens as pawns in their struggle for power, thus benefiting themselves at the expense of the people.

Naranjo is not the only filmmaker working in contemporary Mexico who depicts its corruption and the way in which the government attempts to placate people by staging fake police raids and the false arrests of dangerous criminals. In *La Dictadura Perfecta* (2014), filmmaker Luis Estrada directly and daringly depicts how the government, in collaboration with the media, arranges and films raids to rescue kidnapped people in a way that highlights the heroism of the military forces, and records the apprehension of criminals utilizing actors to play the culprits. Media content that constantly depicts a world of corruption, violence, and evil can make audiences perceive that their reality is similar or equal to its representation on television or film, cultivating a “long-lasting conception of the social environment as wicked and dangerous” (Berkowitz 215). By creating films that portray Mexican life as corrupt and violent, filmmakers are able to create a

feeling of distress and distrust in viewers toward their environment. Hence, Mexican directors seek to create a sense of paranoia and hopelessness in viewers to raise awareness of the falsity of the system by suggesting that the government, police institutions, and the culture industry cannot be trusted.

After the press conference, where Laura is falsely presented as a criminal instead of being treated as a victim of violence and crime, the policemen put her in a patrol car and drive her to an unknown location. There, they let her out of the vehicle and leave. Laura, confused by her sudden freedom, gets up from the ground and starts walking towards the sunlight with her back to the camera. As Laura walks toward the sun, Naranjo suggests that she now has the liberty to fix the reality that haunted her throughout the narrative. Yet, Naranjo does not present any solutions, as in real life, there is no guide as to how to act when facing such crimes. He solely stresses the need to find a solution and take transformative action before everyone is directly affected by the cycle of criminal violence that comes with drug trafficking. The bright light from the sun acts as a ray of hope for viewers, and Laura walking towards it represents Naranjo's invitation to find solutions instead of being complicit. Naranjo then increases the urgency to act in spectators by showing, at the end, a black screen with the statistics on the number of people killed by the Drug War and the amount of money that the drug industry generates in Mexico, showing the power of the cartels and the waves of death and violence that comes with it. Instead of showing a happy ending, which would leave audiences feeling complacent,

Naranjo displays the harrowing reality in which Mexicans live and further makes viewers feel a need to change it.

CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetic Violence and Political Satire in Luis Estrada's *El Infierno*

Four years after President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa militarized the war on drugs in an attempt to stop the violence produced by the struggle between powerful drug cartels in the country, Mexico was celebrating the bicentennial of its Independence and the centenary of its Revolution. Calderón's administration designated approximately 700 million pesos to fund the different events that took place on the anniversary of the country's Independence, on September 15th and 16th, such as fireworks, decorations, parades, and concerts (Sánchez). Before the official start of the festivities in September 2010, the federal government spent years planning the commemoration, which included the construction of a 197.68-acre theme park and the creation of the "Ruta del Bicentenario" (Bicentennial Route), a circuit of eight highways across seventeen states that demarcate the roads traveled by the Independence and Revolution fighters. Since for about five years before the bicentennial the government created a strong advertising campaign and was funding and encouraging the production of historical novels, television shows, and films that revolved around the nation's past, Brian L. Price argues that during this time Mexico became a heterotemporal country, where multiple historical periods were mixed together (272). As the media brought the past into the present, merging Mexicans' present reality with the country's past, the national celebrations served as a distraction from the corruption, poverty, and violence that plagued the country (Price 271), providing

citizens with a way to escape from their harrowing environment by making them feel proud of their history. In that same year, Luis Estrada released his third film, *El Infierno* (*Hell*, 2010), which criticizes the federal government's usage of the national festivities as a way to distract citizens' attention from a country that is in the middle of a war against drug trafficking.

Luis Estrada's cinema is characterized by its harsh criticism against the country's political system and by the way it employs national historic symbols to highlight how politicians and other authoritarian figures use those same symbols—now emptied of their patriotic meaning—to oppress the people. For instance, in *La Ley de Herodes* (*Herod's Law*, 1999), Estrada comments on the way in which the ideals promoted by the Mexican Revolution have become a myth and are exploited by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), the then governing party in Mexico for more than 70 years, for its advantage. Estrada also displays the Mexican Constitution and the figure of President Miguel Alemán, whose government brought an unprecedented economic growth and progress to certain areas of the country in the 1940s (Mora 75), as historic symbols that serve as a façade that hides politicians' opportunism. As a result, Estrada's films have often shaken the government, which has, unsuccessfully, tried to censor them. In 1999, Estrada was denied public funding to distribute *La Ley de Herodes*, and even when he found the money to do so elsewhere, many copies of the film got lost on their way to the theaters (Aldama 80). Estrada took advantage of the government's

attempt to ban the film and used the slogan “¿Por qué no quieren que la veas?” (Why don't they want you to see it?) to promote it. Eleven years later, in 2000, when the shift in power from the PRI to the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, or PAN) brought the promise of more freedom to the industry, presumably allowing films to be openly critical of the government (Aldama 81), *El Infierno* almost suffered the consequences of depicting politicians collaborating with criminal organizations. Even though it was produced using federal funds, which is one of Estrada's greatest accomplishments (Price 271), Calderón's administration attempted to ban *El Infierno* by claiming that it violated the laws on the usage of the national emblem, flag, and hymn (Villamil). Nevertheless, the film made it to theaters in September 16th, 2010, the same date when Mexicans were celebrating 200 years of independence, criticizing the government's splurge on the festivities while citizens were suffering from corruption, violence, and abuse during the Drug War.

El Infierno begins when Benjamín García, known as “El Benny,” says goodbye to his mother and younger brother before traveling to the United States in search of opportunity. Twenty years later, he is deported back to Mexico. When he returns to his old town, he realizes that the violence, corruption, and economic crisis that scourge the country in the times of the war on drugs have devastated the town. People are murdered in the light of day, the townspeople steal the corpses' belongings, and hitmen parade the town showing off their guns without fear of arrest. After learning that his brother, “El Diablo,” was involved in a

drug cartel and was killed a few years ago, Benny decides to take care of his nephew and sister-in-law, who works as a prostitute in a bar and with whom he starts a romantic relationship. When his nephew is arrested for robbery, Benny calls “Cochiloco,” an old childhood friend, to ask for help entering the drug business so that he can earn money to get the child out of jail. Soon after, Benny becomes a wealthy man by working for the local drug lord, performing all kinds of infamous tasks, such as selling drugs to local suppliers, extorting town people, kidnapping civilians, terrorizing villagers and executing enemies. Benny’s life of wealth and excess ends when, one day, his boss’ son is murdered by a competing cartel. Benny realizes that his nephew was involved in the assassination, so he makes the teenager flee the country and goes to the police to secure protection in exchange for testifying against his boss. Yet, he does not know that the authorities also work for the drug lord, and once they let the kingpin know about Benny’s betrayal, they torture and almost kill him. Benny manages to escape and, after he finds out that the cartel killed his girlfriend—his brother’s widow—he kills the drug lord, his wife, and other accomplices on the night of September 15th, when they were celebrating the bicentennial of the country’s Independence.

Cuban filmmaker and theorist Tomás Gutiérrez Alea claims that, in order for viewers to appreciate and understand their environment, they must see reality represented through fiction (33). By representing a dramatized and satirical version of the events that take place in real life, Estrada attempts to raise

Mexicans' consciousness of the reality of their country. His disapproval of the way in which the government utilized the bicentennial to distract citizens from reality infuses his film with a strong critique of the Mexican political system and highlights the corruption and violence caused by the drug war. Moreover, as graphic images of violence in the news media confirm the upsetting events occurring in the world and portray a shameful and unreasonable suffering that must be repaired (Sontag 71), Estrada depicts some of the violent acts associated with narco-violence, such as beheadings and dismemberments, to shock viewers. Unlike Escalante and Naranjo, Estrada is not concerned with portraying how civilians get involved with drug organizations and are victimized by criminal violence. Instead, he suggests that citizens are *already* complicit with corruption and crime, and he depicts how anyone can achieve wealth and power if they are willing to take the necessary actions and actively participate in illicit organizations. In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which Luis Estrada's film raises awareness of the events taking place in the country as it is mired in a drug war. Specifically, I will examine Estrada's use of satire and graphic violence, representing Mexican life in a humoristic and disturbing way, in order to criticize the government's attempts to distract civilians from their disturbing environment. To do so, I first briefly describe Luis Estrada's employment of satire in his previous films, which have denounced different aspects of Mexican politics. Then I analyze his ironic deployment of national symbols, a strategy that invites spectators to regard the country with shame and condemns the Mexican

government's unwillingness and ineptitude to eliminate criminal violence. Next, I discuss Estrada's portrayal of civilians as accomplices in the country's corruption. Lastly, I examine the film's violent ending, which both incites viewers to change their reality by rebelling against those who oppress them, and creates a feeling of desolation by suggesting that Mexicans cannot escape their history.

Estrada's Cinematic Style: The Political Satire

Satire, a genre that originated in Ancient Greek literature, criticizes, in a comic or caricatured way, certain aspects of real life such as customs, social structures, prejudices, and classifications (Hutcheon 49). Its main objective is to benefit society with its mocking interpretation of reality by commenting on moral and social elements of a community (Hutcheon 16), searching to restore positive values by directing its attack toward a social evil (Connery and Combe 9). Luis Estrada's films directly target Mexican politicians, who are always portrayed as selfish and greedy men looking for wealth and power; they only care about their personal richness and supremacy, not the people they rule or the condition of their country. Satirical works always refer to real life and, in order to be effective, depend on the perception of the viewer, who must already have an understanding of the historic context of the story (Bohnert 151–2). In Estrada's cinema, audiences must be familiar with the history of the PRI and PAN in Mexico and other popular events to understand his films as a political critique (Aldama 78), otherwise his satirical interpretation of real life would not work (Bohnert 154). Hence, any Mexican who already knows this information is part of

Estrada's target audience, which is why, in his narratives, he does not provide a background explanation of the times in which his films are set or the specific situations taking place (Aldama 78). This is the reason why, unlike Escalante and Naranjo's cinema, Estrada's films are not recognized internationally; they are made especially for a national audience. Satirical texts, then, display what spectators already know to be true but resist accepting, creating a feeling of despair in viewers and raising awareness of the world around them (Connery and Combe 1). Estrada targets the elements that prevent the country and citizens from progressing and satirizes them with the aim of inspiring audiences to repair the facets of society he thinks to be broken, creating a sense of hopelessness in viewers towards the seemingly unsolvable issues around them.

Satirical techniques that convey critique and impact audiences include irony, parody, negativity, distortion, and humor (Connery and Combe 9). Estrada employs these methods in different ways according to his subjects of attack, which vary from film to film. In *La Ley de Herodes*, where Estrada comments on the dominance of the PRI in the government despite the ineptitude, corruption, and insolence of its politicians, the filmmaker gives the national symbols, such as the Constitution, the national flag, and the figure of the president, an ironic meaning by framing them in the background when the legislators commit criminal acts. For instance, as the portrait of President Miguel Alemán appears in the background of the scenes that show Vargas's dishonesty, such as when he receives money from the local brothel owner, it seems as if the image were

approving the politician's actions. The meaning of progress, legality, and justice associated with the portrait is juxtaposed with Vargas's criminal actions to depict how politicians utilize national symbols as a façade to hide their exploitation of the people. Estrada visually conveys that the meaning associated with the historic symbols is long lost and that they now only serve as a façade for politicians to benefit themselves without caring about the people. Set in 1949, the film shows the story of Vargas, a low-level politician who is appointed mayor of the rural and indigenous town of San Pedro de los Saguaros, where the locals lynched the previous municipal president for his treachery. Almost instantly, the protagonist becomes corrupted as he begins creating new laws to collect taxes and fools the people with the promise that he will install electricity in the village, turning into an evil tyrant capable of anything just to gain power and wealth.

Aside from criticizing the PRI, Estrada argues that the main goals of the Revolution, such as giving rights to the indigenous people and distributing land to the farmers (Knight 228), were not achieved and that all the fighting was in vain. Alan Knight establishes that the Mexican Revolution never really happened, as it did not bring a structural and ideological change to the country (230). It was, instead, a cultural myth constructed by the dominating party, the PRI (Knight 224). Estrada proves the falseness of the Revolution by depicting the indigenous population as ignored by and isolated from the rest of the country, and by showing that the town farmers do not own the lands they work. Moreover, by continuously repeating President Miguel Aleman's government mantra, "traer la

modernidad y la justicia social” (to bring modernity and social justice) and juxtaposing it with the community of San Pedro de los Saguaros, Estrada gives an ironic and contradictory meaning to all post-revolutionary Mexico. The negativity of the tale, combined with the film’s aesthetics, which evoke the Mexican Cinema of the 1940s with its sepia tone and elaborate sets, criticize the way in which the films of that time, such as the popular *Nosotros los Pobres* (1947), reinforced the dominant ideology and status quo while evoking a feeling of shame of the past. The ending of the film, which shows Vargas as a powerful and influential member of the legislative body after escaping the outraged attack from the townspeople, shows the cyclical nature of Mexican corruption, where the vilest politicians are able to rise up to the highest power. The satirical film does not end with a happy conclusion; instead, it conveys that the evil presented is a continuing danger in reality (Connery and Combe 5), seeking to raise viewers’ awareness of their environment, and exhorting them to reshape their country.

In his second film, *Un Mundo Maravilloso* (*A Wonderful World*, 2006), Estrada criticizes the government of President Vicente Fox Quesada, who won the elections against the PRI for the first time in more than 70 years in the year 2000 and promised, during his campaign, to end the misery and ignorance in the country (Muñoz). Yet, even when poverty rates increased, at the end of his Presidential term, Fox continued to celebrate his successes on social policy matters (Muñoz). In the film, Estrada portrays politicians attempting to conceal

the lack of improvement in poverty rates by constantly stating that they have won the “guerra contra los pobres” (war against the poor), until a man, Juan Pérez, accidentally jumps from a window at the top of the World Financial Center in Mexico City. The media exaggerates the event and announces that Pérez tried to commit suicide as a sign of protest against poverty in the country. With the aim of keeping him quiet, the Secretary of the Treasury gives him money and a little house, which only causes more poor people to attempt to commit suicide to get the same benefits. The politician then puts the protagonist in jail and creates a new law that states that being poor and a vagabond is a crime. At the end, Pérez and his friends walk down Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City’s most important avenue, towards the house of the Secretary to protest while holding a red flag. When they are unable to enter the mansion, they break into a home, leave the inhabitants unconscious on the lawn, and enjoy eating dinner in the warmth of the house.

As in *La Ley de Herodes*, *Un Mundo Maravilloso* makes a statement against the present political state of the country, even though its satire is less humorous. Estrada continues to employ symbols from the Revolution to portray that the battle that shaped the country at the beginning of the twentieth century did not change the political and social structure of the nation. In his office, the Secretary of the Treasury has a portrait of former President Porfirio Díaz, whose thirty-year dictatorship inspired the revolutionary fight. The photograph links the present of the narrative to the pre-revolutionary period, stating that the

neoliberalism that came with the adoption of NAFTA “replicate[s] the social conditions of the Porfirian regime” (Price 270). Similarly, Estrada compares the poverty in the country to the adoption of neoliberalism, demonstrating that, while NAFTA proved to be a good economic policy during the country’s economic crisis of 1994, nowadays it does more harm than good by increasing poverty and unemployment rates (Weisbrot et al. 1; De Hoyos 121). Estrada also establishes that poverty leads to violence and crime in Mexico by showing, at the end, how Pérez and his friends attacked fellow civilians to enjoy a night of wealth and a warm meal.

Estrada renews his attack on the PRI in his latest and most daring film, *La Dictadura Perfecta* (The Perfect Dictatorship, 2014). Twelve years and two presidential terms after the shift in power, the PRI won the presidential elections in 2012 through an extensive media campaign that elevated its candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto, to a rock star level (Balderas). *La Dictadura Perfecta* is Estrada’s most critical film, as it directly attacks the actual president, exposes an alliance between the PRI and Televisa, the most powerful television network in the country, and signals the thoughtlessness of the Mexican people for electing a party that has proven to be corrupt in the past. The film begins with a meeting between Mexico’s President and the ambassador of the United States, where the President makes a racial comment that immediately becomes a trending topic and the subject of jokes on social media. With the objective of making the people forget about the President’s latest scandal, TV MX—a fictional network that

parodies Televisa—takes a surveillance video of Governor Camilo Vargas, presumably a descendant of the protagonist of *La Ley de Herodes*, accepting a bribe from a drug trafficker and makes it its leading news story in the evening news show. Vargas, a foul-mothed politician who loves nightclubs and strippers, goes to the television station and pays the executives an exorbitant amount of money to clean up his image and make him the next president of the country through a media campaign similar to the one the current president used.

The main argument in *La Dictadura Perfecta* is rooted in an article published by *The Guardian* newspaper before the national elections, which stated that Televisa sold favorable coverage to Peña Nieto to promote his political campaign (Tuckman). In a country where only small numbers of people read newspapers and have access to the Internet and cable TV, television is the most influential medium (Tuckman). Estrada therefore focuses his critique on the power television holds over the Mexican people. Estrada binds his satirical narrative to reality by parodying real-life scandals, such as Peña Nieto's marriage to a popular soap opera actress just before his nomination as a candidate, the sudden disappearance of a disabled little girl from a wealthy family⁵, and the staged arrest of French kidnapper Florence Cassez⁶. Estrada's use of parody

⁵ In 2010, the media and many Mexicans followed the disappearance of four-year-old Paulette Gebara Farah from her house in Huixquilucan, Estado de México until her dead body was found, a week later, in a gap between her mattress and the edge of her bed frame (Hernández).

⁶ On December 9th, 2005, the French woman Florence Cassez was arrested, together with her boyfriend Israel Vallarta, and accused of kidnapping. It was revealed later that the video showing their arrest in a cottage in the highway between Mexico City and Cuernavaca, which was broadcasted in the most viewed public television networks in the country, was staged and dramatized. Seven years later, Florence Cassez was released (Carbonell).

serves to create distance between the original events and the fictionalized narrative. Thus, the filmmaker allows viewers to create judgements toward the events referred to by the narrative (Hutcheon 44) and raises awareness on the way in which the media manipulates viewers. Additionally, Estrada condemns the attitude of Mexicans and presents them as part of the cause of the impoverished state of the country not only by showing how they elected the candidate representing a corrupt party, but also by not taking action to change the Mexican political landscape. Estrada depicts that political criticism on social media, a resource utilized by the population to convey their disapproval of dishonest and incompetent politicians, ultimately does nothing to solve the problems facing the country, as citizens quickly forget about the legislators' corrupt actions (Villamil). Unlike Estrada's other films, *La Dictadura Perfecta* does not conclude by showing the people attempting to violently rebel against the authorities. Instead, it reveals how criminal organizations and corrupt politicians seize control of the country without any resistance. In such a way, the ending raises awareness of the troubling reality of the country, where the media controls Mexicans and prevents them from rebelling against those in the power.

Estrada's controversial films are characterized by the director's mocking of the government, but none is more harrowing in its depiction of Mexican reality than *El Infierno*, which mixes Estrada's fictionalized and humorous representation of real life with the violence affecting the country as criminal organizations fight each other and the authorities, presumably, try to stop them.

In *El Infierno*, Estrada explores more deeply the relationship between poverty and crime, focusing on drug-related activities. Benny's quick attainment of wealth and power soon after he starts working for the local kingpin highlights that drug trafficking is a lucrative money making solution for those who have minimal or no fixed income (Méndez and Garduño). As previously stated, in *El Infierno*, Estrada criticizes Calderón's government for utilizing the bicentennial of the Independence in an attempt to distract citizens from the bloodshed and violence caused by the drug war, and satirizes national symbols to convey the contradictions between the celebration and reality. At the same time, Estrada expresses his disapproval of the Mexican people, as they not only ignore the dire state of the country and let the government manipulate them, but also are also willing to give up their morals for money. Hence, Estrada stresses that civilians need to become aware of their role in society and the way in which they may be contributing to the conflict before they seek solutions and take transformative action. To inspire viewers to react against the issues depicted, Estrada exaggerates real life and utilizes irony to create distance between it and the narrative, allowing viewers to understand their own environment by seeing a satirized version of it on the screen and provoking questions regarding the country's current situation (Gutiérrez Alea 41). Estrada's biggest distortion of reality is the depiction of the narcos and their extravagant lifestyles. Benny, Chociloco, and Don José Reyes, the kingpin, all wear colorful and ostentatious cowboy outfits, big pieces of jewelry, and handguns with incrustations of precious

stones and gold. The drug lord's excessive wealth and power are also displayed in his office, where he has wooden baroque-like furniture, countless trophies, and dissected animals, such as birds and tigers.

Estrada's alteration of reality contrasts with his depiction of violence, which is not aestheticized (except for the climactic scene), but portrayed as part of Mexicans' environment. Just as Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013), *El Infierno* displays violence in long shots that show the entirety of the disturbing acts happening in Mexico without stylizing them. Yet, while Escalante does not shy away from explicit violence, presenting it in long takes and depicting it as a mundane act—Beto's torture scene is witnessed by a group of unresponsive children— Estrada moderates his use of graphic violence and disturbs viewers, who identify with Benny, by conveying that anyone is capable of harming their fellow citizens for money. Susan Sontag states that showing something at its worst invites an active response in spectators (81). Hence, Estrada represents some of the most inhumane atrocities performed by drug criminals, such as body mutilation and cold blooded murder, to inspire a reaction in viewers. Yet, Estrada does not emphasize some of the most gruesome acts, as flooding the media with images of explicit violence may make viewers lose their capacity to react or be disturbed (Sontag 108). Instead, he positions the camera far from the action and sometimes he does not show it at all. For instance, Estrada does not show the suffering of a man when Benny's new partner, brought from one of the most violent territories in the country, terrorizes one of the villagers by extorting him to

pay the money he owes to Don José. Instead, he shows the hitman getting back into Benny's car and giving him the two fingers and ear that he just cut off from the person he extorted, displaying his terrifying methods of persuasion. In such a way, Estrada increases the feeling of authenticity regarding violence in the film by contrasting the exaggerated narco personalities with non-aestheticized violence, making audiences aware of the cruelty, torture, and slaughter that takes place in the country by moderating the amount of terror shown and encouraging viewers to react against the horrors depicted without desensitizing them.

Ironic Symbols and Government Dishonesty

The strongest technique that Estrada utilizes to raise viewers' awareness in *El Infierno* is giving an ironic meaning to national symbols by using them in an unpatriotic way and by comparing them to the violent and corrupt environment of the country. In such a way, the filmmaker conveys, contrary to the government's public statements, that Mexicans do not have anything to celebrate during the bicentennial of the Independence. Instead, he highlights the many failures that need resolution by creating a sense of despair in viewers. Estrada's disapproval of the national festivities in 2010 is evident from the film's poster, where he represents the reality of the country and the effort made by Calderon's government to cover it with the publicity that accompanied the festivities for the bicentennial of the Independence. In the image, Benny, dressed in stylish narco-attire, with a handgun and a wad of cash tucked into his waist, is leaning against a sign that reads "México 2010." Since, at the time, the Calderón's administration

used the image on the signpost to mark the Ruta del Bicentenario and appeared in every movie, book, television show, film, or billboard subsidized by the government, including *El Infierno* (Price 271), Estrada conveys how the government exploited the celebration and saturated the country with reminders of the upcoming national party. Yet, by displaying the sign in the foreground of the poster with a group of dead bodies piled up together behind it, the filmmaker represents the way in which the festivity was used to distract Mexicans from the bloodshed caused by the Drug War.

Estrada further depicts the corruption and violence in Mexico by including bullet holes, the small drawing of an erect penis, and the inscription “Nada que celebrar” (Nothing to celebrate) on the signpost. The vandalized sign represents the dishonesty and immorality behind the festivities and the government’s deceptiveness toward citizens. Behind Benny, a dead body is being dissolved in a barrel full of acid while a man stirs it with a stick, as if he were cooking. The distressing image references one of the most significant figures associated with criminal organizations. Arrested in 2009, Santiago Meza López, a former construction worker, used to make dead bodies disappear for the Sinaloa Cartel by dissolving them in acid, a job that earned him the nickname “El Pozolero,” in allusion to a traditional Mexican soup made with hominy and pork meat (Nájar). As portraying the elements affecting society through cinema mviewers to improve the world they inhabit (Morgenstern 50), Estrada’s stylization and fictionalization of real events make the film more relatable for Mexican spectators. Since viewers

better appreciate and are able to comprehend their environment by seeing reality through fiction (Gutiérrez Alea 32–33), by including images that refer to real life, Estrada is able to raise awareness of the harrowing truth of the country and the government's attempt to conceal it.

Estrada takes symbols that connote national pride and utilizes them in an ironic way to represent the country's dire condition in a progression of scenes displayed sequentially as a song playing in the background narrates a drug-related crime. The sequence portrays the type of activities that Benny participates in once he becomes involved with drug organizations. The beginning shows Benny and Cochiloco performing illegal tasks, such as drug sale, kidnapping, and extortion, and documents Benny's gain of wealth and power as he abuses his fellow citizens. Then, Estrada portrays the immoral and vicious lifestyle of men involved in criminal organizations by showing Benny doing tequila shots and sniffing cocaine from a prostitute's voluptuous breasts. The next shot portrays Benny and Cochiloco unloading a dead body from a pick-up truck, depositing it on the street, and pinning a warning message to it with a knife. When they flee the scene, a Mexican flag is revealed to be hanging from a building behind them. Estrada juxtaposes the violence of the country with the patriotic meaning associated with the flag, ironizing the national symbol's significance by depicting it as a visual accomplice of the criminal act that just took place, as well as the previous acts shown in the sequence. Later in the sequence, Benny puts a Mexican hat on a dead man who is wearing a poncho

with a narco sign pinned to it. The hat has an inscription that reads “Viva Mexico” (Long live Mexico), a phrase yelled by the president from the balcony of the Government Palace each year during the Independence celebration to commemorate the Grito de Dolores (Yell of Dolores), an imitation of the famous call-to-action that inspired the people to fight in 1810. The positive and patriotic meaning of the hat contrasts with the distressing image of a man killed because of the war on drugs, and the juxtaposition of the two elements makes it seem as if the inscription on the hat was celebrating the tormenting consequences of the violence affecting the country. In the middle of the sequence, Estrada incorporates a real life drug-related case to make viewers relate to the film. The filmmaker alludes to El Pozolero when Benny pours acid into a barrel with a body inside it while another narco stirs the contents. By including a brief but powerful dramatization of the well-known drug-related figure, which is also referred to in the poster, Estrada creates awareness on the harrowing acts taking place in Mexico.

In the sequence, Estrada also signals certain factors that play a significant role in the cycle of corruption and criminal violence caused by drug-trafficking into the United States. One of them is the United States’ involvement in the Mexican drug conflict, as criminal organizations are able to easily purchase large amounts of firearms in the U.S. (Mehalko 299). Toward the end of the montage, Benny and Cochiloco buy an arsenal of firearms and grenades from an American citizen, showing that the lack of federal gun controls in the United States are a

major issue in the violence occurring in both countries (Mehalko 298–299). Yet, the most important commentary that Estrada makes in the sequence is on civilians' involvement with organized crime. The montage begins by showing Benny and Cochiloco selling drugs to a woman who owns a convenience store. At the beginning of the film, she tells Benny that her son was killed by the local cartel. Nevertheless, even though she was directly affected by criminal violence, the woman still collaborates with criminals by buying drugs to sell them in her store. Additionally, Estrada portrays poverty and the lack of opportunities in the country as the main reasons why individuals become involved with crime by showing, through a progressive change in Benny's attire, how one is able to rapidly become wealthy by working for drug organizations. While at the beginning Benny wears ordinary clothes, he is later dressed in the stylized cowboy clothing associated with the narcos. In one of the scenes in the sequence a man is adding gold tips to his boots, displaying the jewelry that drug dealers include in their extravagant outfits and demonstrating the ease with which one can prosper in the drug trade.

Throughout the sequence, a narcocorrido, a type of Mexican folk song that chronicles the lives of drug dealers (Jaramillo 2), plays in the background and acts as a frame that encapsulates the progression of scenes documenting Benny's immersion into the world of organized crime. Narcocorridos are a subgenre of corridos, which have been telling the legends of Mexican folk heroes since the mid-nineteenth century (Jaramillo 3). Corridos were widely used during

and immediately after the Revolution, and at the time they narrated events such as victories, defeats, bullfights, deaths, love affairs, and political corruption, working as a newspaper for the “poor, uneducated, often illiterate, rural Mexicans” (Alviso 60). Estrada’s inclusion of corridos in the sequence, as in other parts of the film, stresses the fact that *El Infierno*, much like the folk songs, is an unofficial way to expose a truth and inform the Mexican people about the violence and corruption taking place in their country. Corridos are also thought to celebrate the often-violent actions narrated in the song and to elevate the protagonist to hero status, dignifying and hailing his illegal and dangerous acts (Alviso 60; Jaramillo 6). As the hero embodies values admired by society, such as bravery, pride, defiance, and integrity, the listener identifies with them as the song progresses (Alviso 60). In such a way, even when the narcocorrido in the sequence does not narrate the complete story of Benny and Cochiloco, it encourages audiences to identify and relate to the characters as the film progresses, especially when they explain that they work for a criminal organization because of the lack of opportunities and the rampant poverty. Hence, Estrada represents in them the appeal that crime has for the majority of Mexicans in the country⁷, as it is a seductive opportunity for people in need of financial stability.

Next, Estrada utilizes the Mexican flag, hymn, and patriotic heroes to accentuate his critique of the bicentennial. In the scene when Don José Reyes,

⁷ According to the World Bank’s 2014 report, 53.2% of the Mexican population lived in poverty in 2014.

the kingpin, is inaugurating a local elementary school, Estrada exposes that criminal organizations, just like the government, utilized the national celebrations as a way to conceal the violence and corruption affecting the country. The scene begins with a crane shot of the school, named “Escuela Primaria Héroes del Bicentenario” (Heroes of the Bicentennial Elementary School). A flag flies on a mast in front of the building and the figures of national heroes Miguel Hidalgo, José María Morelos, Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez, and Ignacio Allende are painted on a mural on a school wall. Initially, the legitimacy conveyed by the flag and the civic act seemingly portrays that the government created the new educational institution, but as the scene progresses, viewers learn that Don José was the one who donated the school. Estrada portrays how the drug lord attempts to legitimize himself and his criminal actions by creating public schools, which should be built by the government. The Mexican flag is waving throughout the scene, as if it were decriminalizing Don José’s persona and his businesses or pointing out the way in which the narco-economy has replaced an important state function. Estrada displays the flag not as a symbol of national pride whose colors symbolize the hope, union, and blood of the heroes that sacrificed themselves for the country, but as a façade used by unlawful institutions to legitimize themselves. The next shot shows Don José and his family sitting in front of a mural with an inscription that reads “Héroes del Bincentenario.” Estrada ironically signals that, in 2010, the narco is the true hero being celebrated, as he is rich, powerful, and assumes the role of the government by building public schools. In

such a way, Estrada depicts how illicit institutions utilize the original patriotic meaning of old symbolic figures for their own benefit. The scene ends with all the characters in the scene singing the national anthem, reciting the words designed to call Mexicans to war when the country is in danger. By doing so, Estrada encourages viewers to identify how those harming the country utilize national symbols to try to appeal to the population.

Estrada criticizes the government's ineptitude and corruption in different ways throughout the film. When Benny goes to Don José's office to ask him for a job, Estrada exposes the long history of collaboration between drug organizations and the government in Mexico's history through the portraits hanging on the wall. The photographs show Don José and his wife with Pope John Paul II, and with former Mexican presidents Vicente Fox, Ernesto Zedillo, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Miguel de la Madrid, tracing the kingpin's involvement with the government as far back as the 1980s. Additionally, Estrada's portrayal of the pictures, in a circular clockwise motion, traces in reverse the story of neoliberalism in Mexico, conveying the filmmaker's disagreement with neoliberal policies, as criminal organizations greatly benefitted from them. Peter Watt establishes that drug trafficking profited from NAFTA since it, like neoliberal capitalism, is stronger in areas where the people have little economic and political power and where the authorities have little interest or strength in combatting criminals and the violence produced by them. Hence, neoliberalism had negative consequences for the country, as reforms such as

NAFTA, which increased poverty rates in the country, “pushed more Mexicans toward the drug industry, both to find work and out of desperation” (Mercille 115). The portraits on the wall exemplify how neoliberal reforms facilitated the growth of drug organizations and made narcotics Mexico’s number one export in an economy based on foreign trade (Watt). By setting *El Infierno* in a rural and impoverished town where authorities collaborate with the local drug industry, Estrada depicts how the poverty caused by NAFTA after the year 2000 contributed to the growth of the drug industry in the country.

Estrada shows the two counterproductive alternatives that impoverished people are left with to make a living, as the government fails to provide them with job opportunities. The first one is emigration to the United States. At the beginning of the film, Benny says goodbye to his family and leaves his poor household to cross the border in hopes of finding a better job. Yet, the next scene shows Benny being deported back to Mexico twenty years later. During his trip back, a man on the bus robs him and later, a group of military men steals the money he had hidden in his underwear. Throughout the film Benny talks about how he had very bad luck in the United States, as he did not make any profit and life there was not good for him. Thus, Estrada depicts that, while emigration seems appealing for those in need, in the end it is unfavorable for them because it is not easy to find a well-paying job and the risk of deportation is constant. The other choice that Mexicans with economic need have is, as has already been described, to join the profitable drug business. Hence, unemployment and

insufficient salaries strengthen the power of the drug cartels (Watt). Nevertheless, while Estrada portrays the profit that one can earn by working with criminal organizations, he does not glorify drug dealers and their lifestyles. Instead, he raises awareness of the dangers that come with the drug business, which involve death and having one's family and loved ones killed. In such a way, Estrada condemns the government for maintaining reforms harmful for society and not creating job opportunities.

Mexicans: Victims or Accomplices of Crime?

Estrada employs different methods to portray that, even when the violence and corruption affecting Mexico damage the lives of civilians, anyone could become involved with criminal organizations. Damián Alcázar, a short, brown-skinned, and mustached actor, is the protagonist in all of Estrada's political satires. In Estrada's first three films⁸, *La Ley de Herodes*, *Un Mundo Maravilloso*, and *El Infierno*, Alcázar plays characters from a lower class that, for different reasons, sacrifice their ethics and integrity for money (Prince 17). The protagonists' physical appearances and humble backgrounds, along with their desire to change their socioeconomic status and help their loved ones, make audiences identify and empathize with the characters. Hence, Estrada represents in his films how the Mexican people, just as Alcázar's characters, regardless of their good and noble intentions to serve the common good, seek their own

⁸ Estrada's fourth film, *La Dictadura Perfecta*, is a different case, since Alcázar interprets the descendant of the protagonist in *La Ley de Herodes*, and as such he already is a powerful character that belongs to a higher economic class.

benefit over the needs of those around them. In *El Infierno*, Benny just arrived from the United States, with no job and no money, and gets involved in the local drug industry to support his brother's family because there were no other job opportunities. Benny starts selling drugs, kidnapping, and extorting the townspeople while earning large amounts of money, which he spends in extravagant cars, jewelry, and stylized clothing. While in *La Ley de Heroes* Estrada depicted politicians exploiting the people, in *El Infierno* he shows that common citizens are also capable of oppressing their fellow countrymen. Thus, he creates an atmosphere of terror and despair in audiences, conveying that all Mexicans want to ultimately become rich and powerful at the expense of their peers.

At the same time, Estrada suggests that Mexican citizens are, in one way or another, accomplices of drug organizations. The director represents their indirect form of collaboration when Benny arrives, for the first time in twenty years, to the town where his brother used to live. In the scene, Estrada first seeks to impress and disturb viewers by depicting the dangers that permeate the town, and then portrays how citizens' behavior contributes to the violence and corruption affecting Mexico. When Benny gets off the bus, he looks at a signpost that reads the name of the municipality, "San Miguel Arcángel." Since San Miguel was, according to the Bible, the archangel who expelled Lucifer from Paradise, Estrada satirizes the name of the town by giving it an ironic meaning, as it connotes that the village is a calm and just place. Yet, a graffiti inscription on the

sign adds an “N” to the name, now reading “San Miguel Narcángel” and expressing that the drug trafficking business has taken over the region and turned it into a violent and corrupt environment. The violence present in the town is evident from the beginning, since as soon as Benny arrives there is sound of gunfire and, as he keeps walking, a pick-up truck with armed men on the back passes him. Then, Benny reaches a road where a dead man is lying on the ground next to a truck. Benny approaches two women watching the scene and asks what just happened. One of the women answers Benny’s question, “¿Pues cómo qué, joven? El pan nuestro de cada día. Acuérdesse que estamos en guerra, eh” (What do you mean, young man? Our daily bread. Remember that we are at war, huh). At this point, Estrada switches from depicting the violence in the town to portraying how civilians are complicit with crime and the way in which the government attempts to cover up the truth. Estrada associates the word pan (bread) with the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional, the governing party at the time), alluding that Calderón’s administration is to blame for the constant violence in Mexico, as it militarized the war on drugs and increased drug related crimes (Olivares Alonso). Then, a child kneels before the dead man and steals his wallet. Even when the woman condemns the boy’s action by saying that he will end up just like the man on the ground, once the adolescent flees, she grabs the man’s watch and runs away. Estrada thus links the woman’s behavior with the corruption caused by drug cartels and condemns citizens’ attitudes, as by being dishonest and exploitative, they are indirectly contributing to the cycle of criminal

violence.

Estrada humanizes the figure of the drug dealer and allows viewers to empathize with him when Cochiloco takes Benny to his house and introduces him to his family, suggesting that anyone in Mexico is able to be wealthy and powerful if they are willing to lose their morals and join organized crime. As Cochiloco is a loving husband and father, who was forced to enter the drug business to support his family, Estrada exemplifies how poverty motivates people to partake in crime. By constantly repeating the phrase “Una cosa es una cosa y otra cosa es otra cosa” (One thing is one thing and another thing is another thing), Cochiloco is able to behave differently according to his environment. He embodies, at different times, an affectionate and charming family man, and a demoralized murderer. Estrada further shows how anyone could be involved in drug cartels by portraying, first, that Mexicans turn towards drug trafficking out of need in an impoverished country, and second, that criminals have a façade that conceals their involvement with illicit organizations from those around them. Thus, the filmmaker is able to portray that just as everyone is complicit with crime, and anyone can also become involved with drug cartels.

Aesthetic Violence

As *El Infierno* turns more violent and chaotic toward the end, Luis Estrada depicts that drug trafficking leads to destruction and death and inspires viewers to rebel against those exploiting civilians. After finding out that his nephew was involved in the killing of Don José's son, Benny takes him to a bus station and

instructs him to cross the border to the United States. Then, in an attempt to leave the drug business, Benny calls a federal agent and decides to testify against Don José and his criminal activities in exchange for protection from the drug lord. Yet, once the hitman finishes giving his confession at the agency, the government officer calls Don José and exposes Benny's betrayal. The agents torture Benny to get him to reveal his nephew's whereabouts, but once they realize he will not confess they drive him back to Don José's house. On the road, Benny convinces the agents to release him in exchange for money and drugs. When he takes them to his brother's grave, an extravagant monument where he hid his savings, the agents steal all his money and execute him. Believing Benny to be dead, the officers put him inside a hole next to his brother's crypt and cover his body with rocks. Estrada represents that there is no escape for those involved in the drug business, as the law enforcement works for the cartels, and thus there is no apparent way of solving the tormenting reality of the country. The morning after, Benny rises from his grave, returns to his house, and finds his girlfriend dead and covered in a pool of blood on her bed. Estrada expresses that drug trafficking eventually leads to death by showing the risk that being involved in the drug industry presents for both the participant in crime and their family, raising awareness of the destructive nature of the business and its dreadful consequences.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea argues that, in order for a socially conscious film to be successful, it must portray a solution for the problems depicted that also

works as a guide to action for the viewers (41). In such a way, Estrada seemingly suggests the measures that Mexicans must take to reform the country at the end of the film, when Benny, after leaving his house for the second time, attacks Don José and all his followers in an act of vengeance for torturing him and killing his girlfriend. After Benny recovers from his wounds, he says goodbye to his mother and his godfather and leaves his mother's house. Benny arrives at night to the main square of the town, where there are people gathered to witness the municipal president perform El Grito de Dolores and kick off the celebration of the bicentennial. Estrada utilizes the celebration of the event that incited the people to fight for their independence 200 years ago to represent the actions that Mexicans must take to restore peace and justice in the country. The celebration is covered with green, white, and red decorations, portraits of the national heroes, and Mexican flags. Don José Reyes, who is now the major of the town, exits the city hall together with his wife, a church cardinal, a policeman, and a military officer. The group accompanying him displays the power of drug cartels and their authority over each sector of society. As Don José receives the national flag, which he will wave during the ceremony, Benny makes his way to the front of the crowd. Once Don José finishes yelling the civic words that commemorate the start of the Independence war, the bells ring and fireworks explode in the sky as Benny opens fire on Don José and the rest of the people on the stage. When he is shot, Don José's body falls over the podium and his blood flows over the Mexican national emblem. The blood over the emblem suggests that the blood of

the criminals must be spilled to put an end to the violence and corruption. Hence, similarly to what he did in *La Ley de Herodes*, Estrada depicts that the apparent solution to end with the corruption and those harming Mexico is a popular revolution; the people need to rise up in arms against the dishonest government and criminal groups to reform the country. Estrada portrays his critique of the bicentennial at the end of the scene, when a sign that reads “Viva Mexico 2010” (Long live Mexico 2010) lights up, ironizing the national festivities’ significance by showing that they celebrate the bloodshed taking place in the country.

Yet, once Benny begins shooting, Estrada switches the speed of the scene to slow motion, changes the editing rhythms, and alters camera positions, which aestheticizes the violence produced by the gunfire to emphasize the bodies falling down and the blood emanating from them as bullets hit them. The scene resembles the final shooting in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), where the filmmaker, aiming to portray the horridness of killing, stylized the violence in the scene by using slow motion, montage editing, and squib work to shock the audiences desensitized by the explicitness of the images of the Vietnam War shown on television (Prince 176). Nevertheless, as Stephen Prince argues, Peckinpah’s stylized violence turned the scene into a stimulating spectacle instead of portraying the awfulness of violence, as the director originally intended (197). Stephen Prince further states that the film medium unavoidably aestheticizes violence, turning it into a pleasurable event for the viewer (27). Hence, filmmakers cannot use explicit violence to convey an anti-

violence statement, as audiences' responses to graphic scenes vary uncontrollably and filmmakers cannot predict such reactions or construct their scenes to avoid multiple interpretations (Prince 32). Therefore, just as *The Wild Bunch*, *El Infierno's* ending has several meanings apart from the one Estrada seems to offer. The most relevant one for this analysis is that Benny never achieved his vengeance in the narrative, as the slow motion detracts from the veracity of the act and gives the scene an oneiric quality that makes it look dreamlike and unreal. Additionally, the location where the agents buried Benny when they thought he was dead is the same place where his tomb is located at the end of the film. That is, from the moment Benny rises up from his grave, the film stops portraying the narrative's reality and, thus, the ending does not depict the actions that viewers must take to reshape the country.

Instead, the savage scene serves as a cathartic ending for the film, allowing viewers to empty their frustrations through Benny's vengeance. *El Infierno's* climax brings closure to Benny's disturbing experience, which starts with him being deported back to his impoverished home and ends with his betrayal by the authorities when he tried to seek protection from his dangerous employer. Hence, after watching a film that portrays a satirized version of real social and political issues, such as injustice, poverty, violence, and corruption, viewers are able to "purge hostile feelings in the safe realm of art" (Prince 19). That is, since Estrada shows Benny, the character with whom audiences identify, fighting corruption, crime, and violence, viewers are not inspired to do the same

in real life. Rather, Estrada utilizes satire, symbolism, and non-stylized explicit violence as a way of creating consciousness of the social evils inhabiting the country and the way in which the government intends to cover them up. The cold-blooded murder of La Cucaracha, who was killed for talking to the federal police, the extermination of the members of the opposite cartel, and the body parts cut-off by hitmen shock audiences by portraying the events happening in Mexico, leaving them “dead inside, yet, somehow, more alive than [they were] two hours before” (McKinney 102). While the graphic images of violence shock and haunt viewers, Estrada’s social critique, expressed through satire and irony, aids in portraying a fictionalized version of real life that helps viewers understand their environment (Sontag 89). When Don José is chanting the civic words that inspired Mexicans to rebel against the Spaniards in 1810, he makes a few crucial errors that ironize his current role as the major of the town. The kingpin mistakes the names of two of the patriotic heroes— he refers to Ignacio Allende as “San Miguel de Allende,” a touristic town at the center of Mexico, and calls Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez “la corredora” (the runner) instead of “La Corregidora” (a nickname applied to the wife of the Magistrate). Additionally, at the end of his speech, he celebrates poverty and its contribution to increasing the strength of drug cartels and corruption of the country when he says “¡Vivan los pobres de México!” (Long life the poor of Mexico. Still, as the people in the town square do not react to Don José’s mistakes and keep on cheering throughout the performance, Estrada portrays, for the last time, Mexicans’ ignorance of their

reality, depicting its effect in the epilogue of the film.

After Benny's attack against Don José and his followers, his nephew visits the cemetery and visits the graves of his own mother and father, as well as Benny's. Then, he drives to a warehouse, where a group of men is packing drugs. He breaks in and shoots everyone inside. Through this epilogue, Estrada conveys that violence is an intrinsic part of Mexico and states that a popular revolution will not change this situation, as people still be involved in crime for many reasons, including the lack of opportunities in the country. Similarly to Escalante, Estrada condemns vigilantism, as it only reinforces the cyclical nature of violence and crime in the country. Since satires require a chaotic and open-ended finale to be able to convey that the social evils portrayed are a continuing danger (Connery and Combe 5), the epilogue creates a feeling of hopelessness by bringing back the feelings purged by the cathartic climax. As it is unclear whether the nephew's final shooting functions as a resolution, Estrada discourages viewers from embracing vigilantism, motivating them instead to find a different solution.

CONCLUSION

In the age of the Mexican Drug War, started in 2003 by cartels fighting over territorial control and export routes, and militarized in 2006 by President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa's attempt to stop the bloodshed (Kellner and Pipitone 31–2), Mexican filmmakers Amat Escalante, Gerardo Naranjo, and Luis Estrada illustrate the way in which the conflict affects civilians. Inspired and motivated by the images of violence circled by the media, such as photographs of beheadings and dismembered bodies, Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada seek to create awareness in Mexicans of the violence and corruption affecting them to inspire them to reshape the political and social landscape of the country. In their films, the directors point out the systemic failures that plague the nation and depict different ways in which each citizen may become a victim of, or a contributor to, the war on drugs. Their movies utilize different methods to recreate the disturbing conditions in which Mexicans live and point out the institutions and individuals harming the country. While the filmmakers include a graphic depiction of narco-generated violence, they moderate and utilize it to enhance their critique of Mexico's reality without glorifying it. In such a way, they are able to portray the violent events occurring in a haunting manner that motivates audiences to fix the country. Yet, the directors do not portray an explicit solution that shows the actions that viewers must take to solve the issues depicted, as the films do not display a conclusion where the violence, poverty, and corruption are eradicated. Instead, the filmmakers create a feeling of hopelessness and despair in viewers

to urge them to find a way to change their environment so that they do not become involved in the situations represented on the screen.

Amat Escalante makes viewers aware of the violence and corruption that surrounds them through a dramatization of reality that attempts to provide an explanation for the explicit images of the Drug War victims that appear in the media. The filmmaker's visual style, composed by long shots, deserted landscapes, long takes, slow-paced editing, and non-professional actors, increases the authenticity of the film and makes viewers see their environment in a new light by seeing a fictionalized version of it on the screen. Escalante portrays the exasperation that Mexicans feel toward the political and social injustices happening in the country by not specifying the affiliation of the military group that attacked Heli's family and the particular town where the film takes place. The ambiguity of these key aspects of the film, together with the initial anonymity of the bodies hanged from the bridge in the opening scene, conveys that Mexicans do not understand their reality and are incapable of comprehending how the condition of the country deteriorated. At the same time, Escalante utilizes symbolism to point out certain institutions that prevent the country from progressing and shows the causes that led to the disturbing environment in which they live, such as poverty, corruption, and incompetence of the law. Finally, Escalante discomforts audiences through his employment of explicit non-aesthetic violence, portrayed through long takes that show the suffering of the person abused, which motivates them to reform the issues with

the political and social landscapes depicted in *Heli* by highlighting the destructiveness, ineptitude, underdevelopment, and dishonesty plaguing Mexico.

Gerardo Naranjo shows the reasons why Mexicans should be afraid during the Drug War, as both drug organizations and the government are capable of exploiting the people in their battle for power and anyone could become collateral damage of the struggle. As the film medium is capable of portraying the factors disturbing society to motivate viewers to improve the world they inhabit (Morgenstern 50), Naranjo's dramatization of real and well-known drug-related cases increases the authenticity of *Miss Bala* and allows viewers to relate the narrative to their own reality. Thus, by mixing real events with fiction, Naranjo raises awareness of the corruption in government institutions and the organizations that oppress citizens. Yet, Naranjo does not portray the specific actions that viewers must take to reform the country. Instead, he constantly portrays, through blurred images, long takes, and overly-emotional performances, a sense of powerlessness and disorientation that convey that there is not a precise guide to end the violence and exploitation plaguing Mexico. Naranjo's moderate portrayal of narco-generated violence, which he achieves by turning the camera away from specific executions, shootings, and rape scenes, enhances his critique of the relationship between drug cartels and police institutions, creating a sense of hopelessness and despair that inspires audiences to reshape their country.

In *El Infierno*, Luis Estrada criticizes the federal government's attempt to

distract the Mexican people from their violent reality with the national celebrations of the bicentennial of the Independence and the centenary of the Revolution. Estrada employs satire and graphic violence to portray Mexican reality in a humoristic and troubling manner, raising awareness of the poverty, corruption, and violence affecting the country during the Drug War and the effort made by Calderón's administration to distract civilians from the factors preventing society's progress. Thus, Estrada depicts a satirized version of reality and ironizes the significance of the patriotic festivities by juxtaposing them with the bloodshed taking place in the country. Estrada also ironizes the meaning of national historic symbols by putting them in the background of scenes of violence and corruption, depicting that they become visual accomplices of the actions occurring and serve as a façade that hides politicians' opportunism. Additionally, instead of portraying how civilians can be involved with or become collateral damage of the struggle between drug cartels and the government, Estrada shows that all civilians are, in one way or another, already complicit with the corruption and crime that have encapsulated Mexico. Estrada's explicit depiction of some of the most violent acts associated with drug trafficking, such as bodily mutilation and cold-blooded execution, disturbs viewers and opens their eyes toward their reality. The aesthetic violence employed during the climax gives the film a cathartic ending that highlights that vigilantism is not the solution to reshape the country, and through the epilogue, Estrada urges viewers to seek for alternative options to stop the seemingly endless cycle of criminal violence.

Despite the fact that none of the filmmakers provide viewers with the specific actions they need to take to correct the country's social and political landscapes, they all condemn vigilantism as a solution. Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada all depict that civilians taking matters into their own hands and going after compromised government officials and delinquents only increases corruption and violence, as they would also become criminals. A deeper study of these cinematic works must include the type of reactions that they inspired in Mexican audiences and, specifically, the changes they may have caused in society. This thesis is limited to the study of the mechanisms employed by the filmmakers to raise awareness and inspire viewers to reform the Mexican social and political landscape. A larger examination must focus on the impact that these narratives may have had in Mexican people to determine if the directors' intentions were accomplished. Furthermore, as two of these films were successful in International Film Festivals (*Miss Bala* and *Heli*), one must also consider the difference in the impact, if any, that these films had abroad and their international reception.

Even though this thesis concentrates on the three most significant works of narrative film made after the beginning of the Drug War that portray civilians' involvement in the drug conflict, a different study must be made about documentary film. Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada's narratives are all based on real life events that take place in the country, but they do not actually capture authentic civilians affected by the violence and corruption caused by drug

trafficking. However, films like Shaul Schwarz's *Narco Cultura* (2013), Bernardo Ruiz's *Kingdom of Shadows* (2015), and Matthew Heineman's *Cartel Land* (2015) all portray how different aspects of Mexico's war on drugs have affected real Mexican citizens. Additionally, a deeper examination of how documentary film captures the struggle of Mexicans during the Drug War must include the filmmakers' intentions and the specific techniques used to capture reality.

Similarly, as Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada are all influenced by images of the hanged, decapitated, and dismembered bodies that appear on the Mexican media, a different analysis could examine the effect that the explicit violence in television, newspapers, and the Internet affects Mexican citizens. Susan Sontag has done a comparable study on the effects of the images of the Vietnam War on American citizens, arguing that even when they show the atrocities that happen in the world, these pictures also desensitize audiences and numb their emotions toward violent scenes. A study on the impact of the media influence on Mexicans must analyze the type of reactions people have toward graphic violence on and beyond the screen.

This project can also be expanded by conducting a study comprising the self-reflexivity of the works of film produced during the Mexican Drug War. Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada all include, in their films, television screens displaying the violent events taking place in Mexico, which question the effects that these have on Mexican audiences by showing spectators looking at the screen while doing everyday activities. Escalante specifically inquires about the

consequences that Drug War images have on viewers by emphasizing a group of youth witnessing Beto's torture. Just as the children appear to be entertained and do not attempt to stop the gruesome act happening in the middle of the room, Escalante criticizes audiences watching the film in theaters for not taking action to stop these events. A meta-cinema study focusing on these cinematic works should investigate the techniques employed by the filmmakers to emphasize the self-reflexivity of the films and the way in which they are aware of themselves to create awareness in viewers regarding their role as spectators of a dramatized version of their reality.

A different version of this project should concentrate on the differences in the depiction of the Drug War between American and Mexican cinemas. Films like Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and Denis Villeneuve's *Sicario* (2015) portray the struggle between Mexican drug cartels and American officials from a foreign perspective. While Mexican films concentrate on the way in which the conflict affects citizens and do not illustrate law enforcement officials attempting to combat criminal organizations, American films emphasize the fight of American agencies to end drug trafficking into the United States. This analysis should include the difference in the portrayal of explicit violence and the intentions behind it, as well as the different mediators that contribute to enhance the power of drug organizations.

Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada raise awareness of the Mexican political and social issues that contribute to the drug conflict and point out systemic

failures, the corruption of the government, and the incompetence of the law to inspire viewers to reform the country. Through their narratives and distinctive visual styles, the filmmakers manage to explain the situations that led to Mexico's corrupt and violent present day. Even though the visceral properties of the film medium make it difficult for filmmakers to convey an anti-violence message, Escalante, Naranjo, and Estrada are able to utilize explicit violence to shock and inspire fear in viewers toward their reality. Hence, from this project, one can conclude that ultra-violence can be used in a non-aesthetic way, together with other elements, such as a dramatization of reality and symbolism, to raise awareness in viewers regarding their environment, identify the agents harming them, and motivate them to take transformative action to reshape the county.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

Master of Fine arts in Film and Television Studies

Boston University, September 2016

Bachelor of Arts in Animation and Digital Art

Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey Campus León, 2013

THESIS

Screening Narco-violence: The Mexican Citizen as Victim of the Mexican Drug Conflict

Thesis readers: Dr. Deborah L. Jaramillo, Adela E. Pineda.

HONORS

Scholarship, Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, 2014–2016

Scholarship, Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2014–2016

Beca Complemento, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2014–2016

Merrit Scholarship, Boston University, 2014–2016

Merrit Scholarship, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey Campus León, 2009–2013

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Boston Latino International Film Festival, Boston, MA, November 2015– Present

Marketing Manager

- Research and reach out to organizations, outlets, and Latin American communities to target for promotional activity.
- Conduct marketing strategies for each film.
- Manage social media.
- Collaborate in the programming of the festival

Univision Boston, Needham, MA, May 2016 – August 2016

News Department Intern

- Assist with the production of the news show.
- Promoted events to local Hispanic audiences.
- Research stories to report on the news show.
- Wrote and edited news stories.
- Interview individuals for news coverage.
- Film local events and reporters.

- Operate the teleprompter.

Boston University, Boston, MA, September 2015 – August 2016

Teaching Assistant: Understanding Film

- Directed a weekly discussion group for up to 20 undergraduate students to supplement their lectures.
- Instructed on film theory, analysis, and aesthetics to guide students in their future film productions and papers.
- Counseled students during their analysis and writing processes
- Held office hours and performed grading duties.

Luis Estrada's Socially Conscious Cinema, San Francisco del Rincón, Mexico, January 2016

Keynote Speaker

- Researched, analyzed, and lectured on the work of the controversial Mexican director Luis Estrada

Allied Integrated Marketing, Boston, MA, May 2015 – August 2015

Publicity and Promotions General Intern

- Collaborated with the publicity department to market films for Boston, Hartford, and Providence audiences.
- Organized promotional screenings and events to market films.
- Implemented film promotions with campus student organizations.
- Researched organizations, outlets, and events to target for promotional activity.

Boston University, Boston, MA, January 2015 – May 2015

Graduate Assistant: The Profane

- The Profane is an upper-level seminar for both undergraduates and graduate students.
- During this semester I assisted the professor during lecture and performed grading duties for weekly assignments.

Boston University, Boston, MA, September 2014 – December 2014

Graduate Assistant: Scandinavian Cinema

- Scandinavian Cinema is an upper-level seminar for both undergraduates and graduate students.
- During this semester I assisted the professor during lecture.

**Ache Producciones, Mexico City, Mexico,
February 2014 – August 2014**

Junior 3D Designer

- Designed products and venues on 3D software for marketing events.

- Designed, modeled, textured, lighted, and rendered on Autodesk 3ds Max and Maya.

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES

American Masterworks—Dr. Roy Grundmann

Hitchcock—Dr. Charles Warren

David Cronenberg—Dr. John Kelly

Scandinavian Cinema—Dr. John Bernstein

TV Theory and Criticism—Dr. Deborah L. Jaramillo

International Masterworks—Dr. Ray Carney

The Profane—Dr. John Bernstein

Movie Stars and Stardom: A Cultural History—Ty Burr

Asian Cinema—Dr. Charles Warren

Latin America through the Lens of Film—Dr. Adela E. Pineda

Writing Film Criticism—John Mall, M.S.

Film Theory—Dr. Leland Monk

French New Wave—Dr. Charles Warren