

## Cinema and the official United States discourse on the ‘war on drugs’: the film *Miss Bala*

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*We are the children of an epoch,  
the epoch is political.*

*Everything of yours, ours, theirs,  
daytime affairs, night-time affairs,  
are political affairs.*

*Like it or not,  
your genes have a political past,  
your skin has a political hue,  
and your eyes a political aspect.  
(...)*

*Apolitical verses are also political,  
and the moon above is shining a thing no longer moonly.  
To be or not to be, that is the question.  
What kind of question? answer, my dear.  
A political question.<sup>1</sup>*

This paper will analyze Grardo Naranjo’s film *Miss Bala* (2011) in terms of its potential to reframe the realm of the possible, discussing issues that have been depoliticized and constrained within a reified political debate involving the illegal drug trade between Mexico and the United States, especially in regards to the U.S. government’s counter-drug policies and discourse. The first section will explore the works of Jacques Rancière, Cesare Casarino, Gilles Deleuze and Michael Shapiro in their analysis of the arts which offer conditions of possibility to rethink the political. Therefore, this dynamic will be analyzed through the visual resources and cinematic techniques employed by Naranjo in *Miss Bala*: the character’s role as a ‘centrifugal being’ (steadicam-driven style camera movements that follow the main character at arm’s length from behind her back); the invisible focus on the ‘out-of-field’; and, the materializations of encounter taking place on mobile sites (the multiplicity and variety of car scenes) and fixed sites (appropriation of the main character’s body through the multiple scenes of dressing and

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<sup>1</sup> Szyborska, Wislawa. “Children of our Age”. *Poems New and Collected*, Harcourt Inc., New York: 1996.

undressing). Each of these elements will be explored in consonance with themes discussed in the literature regarding the illegal drug trade in Mexico with the intent of opening up spaces for alternative critical thinking and arguing that images can and do think politically.

### **1. Politics, aesthetics, cinema: interference and *philopoesis***

Jacques Rancière provides the notion of the politics of aesthetics as part of a process of ‘artistic resistance’. In *Dissensus*, Rancière claims that politics is not the exercise of power, but a “specific mode of action that is enacted by a specific subject and that has its own proper rationality. It is the political relationship that makes it possible to conceive of the subject of politics, not the other way round.”<sup>2</sup>

This radical account of *what* is politics thus becomes the investigation of *when* and *where* politics is and *how* subjects experience political life. Consequently, Rancière affirms that there is no opposition between life and art. But what is art? Art, appreciated through the aesthetic experience – bearing in mind the complexity of this term, which Rancière explores in depth and which will be unfolded throughout this text – is a living form insofar as its the character of the political is “reversed and incapsulated” into the piece of art.<sup>3</sup> According to Rancière, the logic of consensus in society is the seemingly spontaneous logic that separates ideas about what is and what is not proper. Consensus is the logic that delineates the boundary between political and social, art and culture, culture and economy. However, as Rancière’s argues, consensus is unnatural and a result of very specific political choices.<sup>4</sup> In his *Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière argues that, in consensual states “the management of insecurity is the most appropriate mode of functioning”. Consensus is cemented by fear as it accomplishes a sense of “identification between individual and collective interests and between interests and values”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the suspension of the political occurs as certain issues such as excessive fundamentalism and outbursts of violence are ‘unthinkable’ within traditional political categories and are placed

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<sup>2</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, 2010, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, 2010, p.123.

<sup>4</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, 2010, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2010, p.107.

outside of the sphere of the political. For instance, historical episodes of extreme violence such as the Holocaust and other forms of genocide, not fully explainable through traditional political theories end up being ‘classified’ as ‘evil’, ‘inhuman’ and ‘immoral’ and are subordinated to a regime of ethical assumptions which precedes politics, removing them from the sphere of political analysis as such.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the logic of dissensus interferes as a process of disruption and transgression of the limits that consensus as thought and practice sets upon identities. Through their own techniques, art and politics share a common goal, that of creating not only objects and modes of expression through which communities account for themselves, but also conditions of possibility for redistributing the sensible and repartitioning the perceptible. In this way, both politics and art are forms of dissensus.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, in order to counter political moves that foster consensus and reify exclusionary practices, Rancière offers art as a means to abolish hierarchies as it proposes alternative means of structuring sensory experience.<sup>8</sup> Opposing ‘theoreticist elitism’ Rancière is concerned with the gap that separates the universe of scientific cognition from the sphere of ‘misrecognition’ in which the masses are immersed. This gap, according to Rancière, is precisely what allows scholars and politicians to speak for the masses, claiming to know the truth about them; choosing what can and what cannot be politicized.<sup>9</sup> Rancière argues that genuine political and artistic activities involve forms of innovation that remove bodies from their assigned places in society, disrupting the structure of power relations between groups. Therefore, politics is inherently aesthetic and the aesthetic is inherently political.<sup>10</sup> In other words, “political thought is not that which is performed in transcendent fashion by the intellectual who reads culture for its signs of

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<sup>6</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. ‘The lesson of Rancière’. Rancière, Jacques. *The politics of aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2000, p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, 2010, p. 1-3, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus*, p.176.

<sup>9</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. ‘The lesson of Rancière’. Rancière, Jacques. *The politics of aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2000, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, p. 2.

truth, but that which is produced immanently by the collective of those engaged in political action.”<sup>11</sup>

Building onto Rancière’s work, scholars such as Michael Shapiro suggest turning away from technically-oriented inquiry and moving towards critically-oriented modes of investigation seeking to identify the political privileges that emerge over time and establish what is licit and what is illicit, what is visible and worthy of political concern and what is not. The overall aim of this process would be to promote self-reflection and disruption of prevailing power arrangements, so as to provide people with an alternative to their day-to-day surrender to authority.<sup>12</sup> Michael Shapiro departs from the Kantian legacy that values “the conditions of possibility for the emergence of what is perceived, encourages recognition of multiplicity, of alternative worlds (containing differently implicated subjects) within which things can emerge as objects of knowledge”.<sup>13</sup> Inspired by Gilles Deleuze, Shapiro conceives of political thinking as a creative process and philosophy as a mode of conceptual invention rather than as sets of norms for testing and validation, so that it becomes possible to assess the epistemological contributions derived not just from academic works but also from artistic genres such as literature and painting, which “challenge hierarchies of sense-making and entrenched models of intelligibility”.<sup>14</sup>

In order to challenge traditional modes of subjectivity, exploring the interactions between academic and artistic texts, the philosopher Cesare Casarino suggests the notion of *philopoesis*, a historical-material practice which allows for and demands “a certain discontinuous and refractive interference between philosophy and literature”<sup>15</sup>. Interference, as Casarino argues, is the act of treating intellectual and artistic practices as indistinguishable, locating them precisely in the zones where they are indiscernible from each other, because interference and practices are

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<sup>11</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2010, p.8

<sup>12</sup> Shapiro, Michael. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro, Michael. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Shapiro, Michael. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> Casarino, *ibid.*, 2002, p.66.

always tied together at their ‘forms of being’. *Existing* is being in interference; and *being* is only and always rooted in practice. Thus, this philopoetic interference or ‘interferential ontology’ suggested by Casarino is not just an ontological basis for investigation but praxis, and therefore, it is political. In other words, philopoesis as an investigative method cannot be reduced to scientific and bureaucratic procedures, because only when engaging with the intersections between theory and practice, between philosophy and literature, it becomes possible to analyze a text’s political intentions.<sup>16</sup>

Casarino points out that every mode of thought has an ‘outside’, which is not related to an interior or exterior, but to a “plane of immanence”, located ‘without’<sup>17</sup>. Also, each mode of thought has a “porous threshold” which separates it from this ‘outside’ but also filters in its undeniable demands, forces it cannot explain but which nonetheless inscribe themselves into the mode of thought in question. In the case of philosophy, for example, the plane of immanence would be a “non-conceptual space” which is “non-philosophical”, perpetually bordering on the outside chaos it cannot grasp but does not cease to try. In other words, the outer plane of immanence is “a sort of groping experimentation” where “measures that are not traditionally ‘respectable’, rational, or reasonable” are applied. Casarino believes that these ‘measures’ can be dreams, religious or substance-induced experiences; transcendental experiences in general. Interference lies precisely where philosophy, or any other mode of thought, touches this outside and recoils back into its own ‘consciousness’, when it thinks its unthought, attempts to unveil what it cannot represent.<sup>18</sup>

What Casarino calls the ‘outside’ can be understood as the world in its multiple intelligible dimensions, a spatio-temporal field common to all forms of thinking and being. Thus, art, literature and science – as the three basic expressions of thought – all struggle with and against the same forces. In synchrony with Rancière but building onto his claims, Casarino argues that this scenario, wrought by interference, renders academic, literary, artistic and scientific texts

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<sup>16</sup> Casarino, *Ibid.*, 2002, p.66-67.

<sup>17</sup> In reference to Herbert Marcuse’s notion of without as per Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge, 1964.

<sup>18</sup> Casarino, Cesare; “Philopoesis: A Theoretico-Methodological Manifesto”. *Boundary 2*, Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2002, p.71-73.

absolutely distinct from each other but, concomitantly, the same.<sup>19</sup> When modes of thought dare to come to terms with their outside, with what cannot and yet must be thought – each through its own means that are never identical – they share a unique goal that binds them together, displaying what Casarino calls a ‘sameness’<sup>20</sup>: they come into being as works of resistance.<sup>21</sup>

What kind of resistance does Casarino refer to? Where, when and how does it come about? According to the author, resistance starts with existence. Any and every text, for the simple fact of being, is inevitably questioning its own existence. In his own words:

all writing is always murmuring with virtual questions, and above all with the question of itself, that is, the question of what it is and of what it is that it is doing there on the page, as well as with the question of what it is that you and I become when reading it in the first place—for it is always the realm of the virtual that puts us and the whole world into question.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, resistance comes about through ‘philopoesis’ – the method/activity constituted by the interference between philosophy and literature as modes of thought – giving rise to virtual questions that cannot be avoided and yet cannot be exhausted.<sup>23</sup> This ‘silent threefold questioning’ of a practice – the questioning of itself, its practitioners and of all practices exterior to it – is precisely an inquiry into the “history of forms, a questioning of history as status quo. (...); in questioning each other, “philosophy and literature put the whole world into

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<sup>19</sup> Casarino. *Ibid.*, 2002, p.74

<sup>20</sup> Casarino, *Ibid.*, 2002, p.74. Casarino exemplifies with capitalism: he argues that Melville and Marx think outside modernity and if modernity is the history of capitalism, daring to think outside the history of modernity is an act of resistance to capitalism.

<sup>21</sup> For illustration purposes, a musical analogy may be helpful. Consider Casarino’s outside, or plane of immanence, as the universe of music. Each mode of thought could be seen as a musical genre. While every mode of thought is constituted by ‘practices, concepts, sensations and functions’, every music genre can be defined by its rhythms, melodies, harmonies, specific musical arrangements and instruments, etc. Therefore, while hardcore punk, samba, jazz, folk, classical music, salsa, pop rock, amongst many others, are undoubtedly distinct genres, they are all expressions of affects, ideas and thoughts through the play between sound and silence. Each of them has a specific spatio-temporal and cultural insertion; yet, each cannot be thought of as independent from the interferences with one another, which cross-fertilize styles and blur the boundaries between them. A clear example is the composition ‘Nem um Talvez’ written and arranged by traditional Brazilian composer Hermeto Pascoal and recorded with Miles Davis. While ‘Nem um Talvez’ is a jazz standard played big-band style, it came into being through the hands of a man who wrote his first pieces of music as a child, strumming clotheslines for harmony and tapping lake water for percussion. In this way, a song can be seen as a text, limited yet infinite in its own (im)perfection; a microcosm of interference.

<sup>22</sup> Casarino. *Ibid.*, 2002, p.77

<sup>23</sup> Casarino, *Ibid.* 2002, p.78

question.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore it is possible to conceive of philopoetic investigation as an ontological and political enterprise. Analyzing Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* and a Karl Marx’s text *Grundrisse*, Casarino affirms:

One can articulate the potential interference between Marx and Melville precisely to the extent to which they are both thinkers who found it necessary to depart one from the practice of philosophy and the other from the practice of literature in order to experiment with whole new worlds of writing and thought, and who, in doing so, embarked in far-reaching investigations into the political nature of being that are virtually indiscernible from each other. It is in this sense that philopoesis attempts to make Marx a problem for literature and Melville a problem for philosophy as well as to make both a problem for any thought of resistance.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, cinema is a visual re-enactment of philopoesis, to the extent that it settles the quarrel between art and technique because it changes the very status of the ‘real’. Cinema does not reproduce things as they offer themselves to the natural gaze but it records them “as the human eye cannot see them, as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties”.<sup>26</sup> Cinema restores to events “the power they had been deprived of by the opaque screen of the human brain”<sup>27</sup> bringing forth the possibility of anything and everything in the world being available to art, “as pure presences, as naked realities brought to light by the new-found splendor of the insignificant”.<sup>28</sup>

In order to be thought, the ‘real’ is invariably transformed into narratives, which are in turn embedded into hierarchies of meaning. For Jacques Rancière, this translates into the idea that the ‘real’ must be fictionalized in order to be thought. Rancière does not claim that everything can be considered fiction, but that the fiction of the aesthetic age defines models for connecting the

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<sup>24</sup> Casarino, *Ibid.*, 2002, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Casarino, *ibid.*, p.79.; (Shapiro, p.5) Illustrating this rationale, Michael Shapiro discusses a fiction detective novel by Sciascia, as opposed to an academic account of civic life produced by Robert Putnam, as an example the workings of a philopoetic ‘double reading’. Sciascia, he argues, “in the process of inventing his detective story, (...) offers a more nuanced mafia-implicated political account of Italian civic life than one can derive from Putnam’s brief and dismissive inference that the mafia operates outside of civic culture rather than constituting part of it.”

<sup>26</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Film Fables*. Oxford: Berg, 2006, p.2.

<sup>27</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Film Fables*. Oxford: Berg, 2006, p.5.

<sup>28</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Film Fables*. Oxford: Berg, 2006, p.9.

presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blur the borders between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction. Rancière argues that “politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say, material arrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done”.<sup>29</sup>

Jacques Rancière derives much of his insight on cinema and the politics of aesthetics from the works of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze offers a radically different approach both to the aesthetics and politics of cinema and to philosophy itself. Deleuze argues that philosophy is the creation of concepts and concepts are the images of thought.<sup>30</sup> From this assertion Deleuze derives the assertion that philosophical concepts are in resonance with pictorial and cinematographic images. The author explores the elements of space, time, movement and image in two main volumes, *Cinema I* and *Cinema II*. Although these volumes are undoubtedly inexhaustible sources of themes for philosophical debate, this discussion will highlight specific notions put forward by Deleuze that are pertinent to this study. Deleuze asserts that space covered is past, while movement is present; pace is divisible and movement is indivisible, as it changes qualitatively each time it is divided. Spaces all belong to a single homogeneous space, while movements are heterogeneous and irreducible amongst themselves.<sup>31</sup> Through images, which are instantaneous sections of movements in space, cinema is able to reconstitute these very movements, giving the viewer a movement-image and thus reconstructing natural perception.<sup>32</sup> The cinematographic image is always subject to division as it is composed by a consecutive montage of frames. Through montage, using techniques such as close-ups, landscape views, and zoomed shots of details often invisible to the naked eye, amongst others techniques, framing ensures a deterritorialization of the image and expands the number of possible points of view.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The politics of aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 2000, p.39.

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.xi.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.2-3.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema I: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.14-15.



Cinema's movement-image extracts from moving bodies their mobility in the sense that it is able to produce its own perspective of time: because it can contract, dilate, slow-down or accelerate movement, a film becomes not just an intelligible form but also a sensible form that organizes the perceptive field as a function of an intentional consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Thus, cinema goes beyond the limits of representation. Films disrupt optics, perspective and logic, enabling the reversal of values and producing a direct thinking effect on the audience, consciously or not.<sup>35</sup>

Deleuze describes films in which time is subordinate to movement by introducing the notions of three types of movement-images: perception, affection and action-images. He begins by asserting that movement organizes the perceptive field as a function of a situated intentional consciousness, and in this way, cinema can "bring us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them", suppressing the "anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world".<sup>36</sup> Unlike in other forms of art, in cinema the world becomes its own image. Image is movement, because every image is indistinguishable from its actions and reactions.<sup>37</sup> Deleuze argues that a 'thing' and its perception are one and the same and that subjectivity is subtractive, as the subject perceives something minus what does not interest him/her. In this way, cinema does not take natural subjective perception as its model, because the mobility of its centers and framings lead it to restore acented and deframed zones. Thus, the perception-image emerges like the movement-image as a centre of indetermination.<sup>38</sup> According to Deleuze, cinema's perpetual function is to make the viewer constantly move between poles, from objective to subjective perception; revealing a correlation between perception and the 'camera consciousness'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.23, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Frampton, Daniel. *Filmosophy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006, p.62.

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.60.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.58.

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.64.

<sup>39</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.74.

Furthermore, Deleuze asserts that philosophy and cinema are equally valuable as conceptual practices and neither stands in advantage or superiority to the other. At the level of interference, where modes of thought intersect and attempt to come to terms with their outsides, cinema brings to light intelligible content through which language constructs its objects.<sup>40</sup> Everything that the camera does not frame constitutes a larger set of unlimited content, which Deleuze calls the ‘out-of-field’, that which is “neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present”.<sup>41</sup> Thus, scene montages and scene juxtapositions have the power to replace, obliterate and re-create objects, and in this way trigger mental connections different from those present in daily lived experience.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, cinema, “when viewed critically, can be used to challenge episodes of violence deployed in official war policy and other modes of coercion and abjection” and can thus provide “superior access to empirical veracity than other forms of managed perception”, restoring what scientific abstractions remove.<sup>43</sup> Films derive ethico-political implications from the way they display images of pain and suffering, articulating aesthetic modes of comprehension with ethico-political ones; they are a form of representation that challenges discursive denial because they transcend the limits of perception.<sup>44</sup> Due to their form, films allow ‘slow looking’ and extended reflection, as they provoke sensation and criticism, encouraging public consideration and negotiation of meanings and concepts that are taken as settled.<sup>45</sup> In this way, film in particular has the effect of encouraging reflection and inciting the negotiation of fixed moral codes, because it functions without a dominant center. Moreover, according to

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<sup>40</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The time-image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Athlone Press, 1989, p.262.

<sup>41</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: the movement-image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.16.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel. *Filmosophy*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006, p.75.

<sup>43</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. *Cinematic Geopolitics: Global Horizons*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Shapiro, Michael J., “Slow Looking: The Ethics and Politics of Aesthetics”, *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, V.37, No.1, p.185.

<sup>45</sup> Shapiro, Michael J., “Slow Looking: The Ethics and Politics of Aesthetics”, *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, V.37, No.1, p.182-183.

Michael Shapiro, film is a form of mechanism that makes the real more apparent than vision, allowing the audience to take the position of a critic because it takes the position of the camera.<sup>46</sup>

Shapiro does not concentrate his analysis solely on film narratives in order to question political fixities and create possibilities for critical thinking. He calls attention to the aesthetic dimension rather than the psychological drama and story-lines, placing the emphasis more on images and film techniques and less on film narratives, so that the reflection provided by the film is driven by the changing “historico-political frame within which the drama takes place”.<sup>47</sup> Michael Shapiro develops the notion of aesthetic subjects, which incorporate this critical attitude towards political thought. A film’s characters standing for aesthetic subjects are “the personae through which artistic genres articulate and mobilize thinking”.<sup>48</sup> Shapiro concentrates on their trajectories and moments of encounter and what these reveal about their multiple spatio-temporal realities and types of social roles they play.<sup>49</sup> The focus of political analysis should be on “the multiplicity of subject positions historically created within those spaces” and on the dynamics surrounding these aesthetic subjects, which cannot be gathered in mathematical terms because they are a representation of a “complex political habitus.”<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, Shapiro affirms that the impact of a critical film is “its ability to disturb that already initiated interpretive work” put forward by the spatio-temporal models of identity-difference, “so that viewers can apprehend the extent to which they have labored within an anachronistic imaginary, an officially promoted illusion, or a merely partial mapping of a sinister world.”<sup>51</sup> Also, through films the “constructed nature of the (represented) reality” is “repeatedly

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<sup>46</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. *Cinematic Geopolitics: Global Horizons*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.31.

<sup>47</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. *Cinematic Geopolitics: Global Horizons*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.4, 8-11.

<sup>48</sup> Shapiro, Michael. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p.18.

<sup>49</sup> Shapiro, Michael. *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p.22.

<sup>50</sup> Shapiro, Michael J. *The Time of the City*, London: Routledge, 2010, p.7

<sup>51</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. *Cinematic Geopolitics: Global Horizons*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.48.

challenged, revised, and opened up to future possibilities and modifications” disrupting a supposed stable and ‘essential’ nature of reality.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, cinema’s perception-transcending capacity is reached through the way that aesthetic subjects’ movements map the spatio-temporality of worlds, “as cameras afford perspectives other than the characters’”, enabling the viewer to recognize the way the film thinks and opening up conditions of possibility for alternative imaginaries to emerge.<sup>53</sup> In Sum, Shapiro offers cinema as a powerful tool with which to investigate moral and political, invisible and physical boundaries in order to “understand the conditions under which modern claims to sovereignty and subjectivity have been sustained and articulated.”<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, the author claims that urban city politics has traditionally been framed in a Tocqueville-inspired, government-oriented model of politics in which there is little space for the analysis of the struggle of marginalized bodies, to which political relevance or recognition are not attributed.<sup>55</sup> However, as argue Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, the urban world is constituted by moments of encounter, not enduring sites with fixed temporal and spatial locations but variable events, “fluxes of interrelation.”<sup>56</sup> The authors conceive of the city as a type of ‘kaleidoscopic world’, where hybrid networks are constantly in collision “touching, fighting, engaging, cooperating, parasitizing, ignoring.”<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the ‘materialism of the encounter’ is the spring board from which to begin a study of the urban world.

Consequently, Shapiro’s chooses to focus on “urban micropolitics” in order to capture the multiplicity and complexity of city politics. The author believes that new technologies such as film and photography have important re-spatializing implications, which alter the assemblage of

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<sup>52</sup> Ziarek, Krzysztof. “Carlos Saura: Cinematic Poiesis”, Phillips, James (ed.), *Cinematic thinking: Philosophical Approaches to the New Cinema*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, p.71.

<sup>53</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. *Cinematic Geopolitics: Global Horizons*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p.153.

<sup>54</sup> Walker, R.B.J., *After the Globe, Before the World*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p.3.

<sup>55</sup> Shapiro, Michael J. *The Time of the City*, London: Routledge, 2010. p.4.

<sup>56</sup> Amin, Ash; Thrift, Nigel. *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p.30-31.

<sup>57</sup> Amin, Ash; Thrift, Nigel. *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002, p.30.

social agency as they “ambiguate traditional territorialities and subjectivities.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the focus on an ‘urban micropolitics’, in which “some bodies are engaged (...) in merely conforming to the postures and routes officially prescribed, while some are (...) involved in ‘lines of flight’ as they seek to escape the authoritatively prescribed modes of urban subjectivity” enables the dynamics inscribed on marginalized bodies to become visible, intelligible and thus, subject to contestation.

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### ***Miss Bala* and the “war on drugs”**

The film *Miss Bala* is an excellent example of the reenactment of philopoesis. Underlining the analysis of this film in terms of its potential to reframe the issue of the “war on drugs” are the following questions: how does this film as text address the problems of presence and lived experience? How does it produce the intentional meanings that are ascribed to subjects? How does it center and anchor the subject and his or her experiences in a narrative? And finally, how does it text represent the so-called “real” experiences?

*Miss Bala* operates through a “poetics of knowledge”, a practice through which discourses are revealed “specifiable, not by forms of self-legitimation” based on their object of study, but by “poetic operations with which they establish the visibility of objects” and leave them out in the open to be devoured by thought.<sup>60</sup> By triggering alternative sensory experiences other than rational thought, the cinematic readings proposed attempt to illuminate some aspects of drug trade dynamic, striving “to achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another”.<sup>61</sup> The analyses offered through the study of *Miss Bala* will focus on three principal aesthetic resources used by the director Gerardo Naranjo, which will guide the analysis hereafter: a ‘centrifugal being’ (steadicam-driven style camera movements that follow the main character at arm’s length from the back); the invisible focus on the ‘out-of-field’; and, materializations of encounter taking

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<sup>58</sup> Shapiro, Michael, J. “Bowling Blind: Post Liberal Civil Society and the Worlds of Neo-Tocquevillean Social Theory”, *Theory & Event*, 1.1, 1997, paragraph 22.

<sup>59</sup> Shapiro, Michael J. *The Time of the City*, London: Routledge, 2010, p.10

<sup>60</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010. p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Borriaud, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002, p.8.

place on mobile sites (the multiplicity and variety of car scenes) and fixed sites (appropriation of the main character's body through the multiple scenes of dressing and undressing). Each of these aesthetic techniques will be analyzed in terms of their potential to reframe the realm of the possible, reveal the unsayable and legitimize thinking space for the unthinkable, for issues that have been depoliticized and shut out from political debate.

The film *Miss Bala* takes place in the Mexican state of Baja California, one of the most afflicted regions by the illicit drug trade. The illicit drug trade, as argued by many specialists, governments and international media, is one of the fastest growing and most profitable industries worldwide, with approximately 210 million consumers and worth approximately 320 billion dollars per year – the cocaine industry is responsible for one third of the sales profits.<sup>62</sup> Mexican drug cartels control most of international smuggling and U.S. wholesale drug markets<sup>63</sup>, which is estimated by analysts to be worth \$13 billion US a year.<sup>64</sup>

The United States is the world's largest illicit drug market, accounting for thirty-seven percent of all cocaine users globally<sup>65</sup> and the majority of Latin American and Andean production is destined to the United States, with Mexico as its major transit and source country for illicit drugs: virtually all opiate production in the North American continent takes place in Mexico<sup>66</sup> and approximately ninety-five percent of all cocaine production flows into the U.S. through Mexico.<sup>67</sup> Although the country's population represents less than five percent of the world's total population, Americans consume two-thirds of the world's illegal drugs and the US incarcerates almost a quarter of the world's prisoners, of whom more than eighty percent have at

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<sup>62</sup> Organization of American States. *The drug problem in the Americas: Studies*, May 2013, OEA/Ser.D/XX.4/Add.4, p.5.; UNITED NATIONS. **UNODC World Drug Report 2011**. United Nations Publication. Sales No. E.11.XI.10, 2011; STOP THE DRUG WAR NGO. Global World Drug Trade Worth \$320 Billion Annually, UN Says. Stop the Drug War. January 2005. Available at: <http://stopthedrugwar.org/chronicle-old/393/320billion.shtml>. Obtained on 12 December 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Organization of American States. *The drug problem in the Americas: Studies*, May 2013, OEA/Ser.D/XX.4/Add.4, p.5.

<sup>64</sup> Statsna, Kazi. "How much are Mexico's brutal drug cartels worth?" *CBC News*. July 17th, 2013, accessed September 9th, 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/how-much-are-mexico-s-brutal-drug-cartels-worth-1.1333213>.

<sup>65</sup> UNODC. *World Drug Report 2011*. United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.11.XI.10, p.35-36.

<sup>66</sup> UNODC. *World Drug Report 2011*. United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.11.XI.10, p.35.

<sup>67</sup> United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.317.

some point had involvement with illegal drugs and/or alcohol.<sup>68</sup>, the United States spends approximately ten billion combating the illegal trade through policies set out by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP).<sup>69</sup>

In the United States, since former President Nixon declared an all-out ‘war on drugs’ in 1971, the country’s counter-drug policy and foreign assistance has involved collaboration with international partners “to disrupt trafficking organizations as well as the production and movement of drugs”.<sup>70</sup> These partnerships have materialized, most notably, in Colombia, as the National Consolidation Plan – the successor to Plan Colombia, created in 1999 – and in Mexico, through the Mérida Initiative, announced in late 2007.

A significant part of the literature on the ‘war on drugs’ deems it ‘America’s new war’ and asserts that, since the end of the Cold War, the so-called communist threat that largely guided U.S. policies to Latin America left an ideological vacuum. In this context, the ‘war on drugs’ would be a convincing substitute to justify the security rationale underlining Latin American policy. Many argue that as the Andean region remains fraught with paramilitary and insurgency conflicts, ‘the war on drugs’ is the result of an overarching U.S. foreign policy guided by the ‘war on terrorism’ and the need to promote U.S. business and strategic interests such as a free market economy and democracy.<sup>71</sup>

Few analysts of the so-called ‘war on drugs’ would dispute the view that that the escalation of U.S. pressure over security concerns in Latin America happens at the cost of multilateral efforts to strengthen human rights, development, democracy and trade.<sup>72</sup> Gian Carlo Delgado-Ramos and Silvina M. Romano, for instance, assert that the “current economic, political, and

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<sup>68</sup> American Public Health Association. “Report finds most U.S. inmates suffer from substance abuse or addiction”. *The Nation’s Health*. April 2010 vol. 40 no. 3 Available at: <http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/40/3/E11.full>. Obtained on 11 March 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Estimate for FY2011. United States Department of State. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012*, p.14.

<sup>70</sup> United States Department of State. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012*, p.15-16.

<sup>71</sup> North American Congress of Latin America. “After the Cold War: In the Wake of Terror - Bush II in the Americas.” *US Policy Report* 35, N.3, 2001, p.13; McGovern, James P. *Latin America Policy in the Next Two Years*, March 2011, p.2.

<sup>72</sup> Delgado-Ramos, Gian C.; Romano, Silvina M. “Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration.” *Latin American Perspectives*. 38:93, 2011, p. 93.

security model implemented by the United States establishes the conditions for indirect but substantial interference on behalf of U.S. interests” in Mexico and Latin America.<sup>73</sup> The authors state that militarized U.S. policy initiatives are not only directed at ensuring “more secure environments for investment” and combating drug trafficking but also at annihilating “‘terrorism’ and narco-funded insurgency”.<sup>74</sup> The authors also state that the regionalization of the war against “narco-terrorism” has taken place under pressure from the United States, which has sought to maintain bilateral economic and security relations in order to neutralize the possibility of a genuinely multilateral agenda.<sup>75</sup>

Even though the post-Cold War context translated into readjustment and a decrease in military aid worldwide, U.S. military presence in terms of training, weapons transfers and resources has been steady in Latin America.<sup>76</sup> Colombia is amongst the largest recipients of U.S. military aid, and the region continues to receive aid at unprecedented levels. For example, the amount assigned by the United States to counter-drug programs in the region is estimated at nearly US\$2.8 billion for the Colombia Plan/Patriot Plan between 2002 and 2008 and at US\$1.3 billion since 2008 for the Mérida Initiative.<sup>77</sup>

Analysts critical to the U.S. efforts against the ‘war on drugs’ express concerns in regards to resource distribution amongst private contractors hired to implement policies such as training and policing, to the distribution of aid amongst countries and to the costs to human rights and liberties as well as the lack of transparency and accountability in these processes.<sup>78</sup> Overall, critics agree that the primary danger in the militarization of U.S. initiatives is that “priorities and

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<sup>73</sup>Delgado-Ramos, Gian C.; Romano, Silvina M. “Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration.” *Latin American Perspectives*. 38:93, 2011, p.94.

<sup>74</sup>Delgado-Ramos, Gian C.; Romano, Silvina M. “Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration.” *Latin American Perspectives*. 38:93, 2011, p.95.

<sup>75</sup>Delgado-Ramos, Gian C.; Romano, Silvina M. “Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration.” *Latin American Perspectives*. 38:93, 2011, p.100.

<sup>76</sup> Rodin, E.; Youngers, C.(eds). *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of US Policy*. London: Lynne Rienner, 2005, p.39.

<sup>77</sup> Beittel, June et. Al. *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counter-drug Programs*, Congressional Research Service. Washington, DC: 2010, p.6.

<sup>78</sup> North American Congress on Latin America. *After the Cold War: In the Wake of Terror - Bush II in the Americas*. US Policy Report 35, N.3, 2001, p.18.



policies in the region may increasingly be determined according to strategic, not political, criteria”, as U.S. decision-makers are likely to have greater access to information from Latin American military and police officers than from the civilian leaders themselves<sup>79</sup>, revealing a deep rift between U.S. priorities and Latin American priorities. Although the United States insists on collaborative policies based on shared objectives, crime and insecurity, unemployment and economic issues are the region’s top concerns while Washington’s alleged priorities are terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration.<sup>80</sup>

In regards to most recent U.S. counter-drug policy, while the Clinton and Bush administrations’ public discourse accompanied their increasing commitment to this ‘war’, the prevailing view about the Obama administration’s stance is that it has “maintained important continuities in relation to policies of previous governments while couching them in a discourse that suggests a contrary position, one that stresses the importance of dialogue and peaceful interaction.”<sup>81</sup> As per the 2011 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, President Obama states that “combating international criminal trafficking networks requires a multidimensional strategy that safeguards citizens, breaks the financial strength of criminal and terrorist networks, disrupts illicit trafficking networks, defeats international criminal organizations, fights government corruption, strengthens the rule of law, bolsters judicial systems and improves transparency”.<sup>82</sup> The U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), various U.S. law enforcement organizations including the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and U.S. Coast Guard are all part of The United States’ drug war *dispositif*.

According to the US Justice Department, Mexican drug cartels represent “the biggest organized crime threat to the United States” operating in approximately two hundred and thirty

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<sup>79</sup> North American Congress on Latin America. *After the Cold War: In the Wake of Terror - Bush II in the Americas*. US Policy Report 35, N.3, 2001, p.20.

<sup>80</sup> McGovern, James P. *Latin America Policy in the Next Two Years*, March 2011, p.2.

<sup>81</sup> Delgado-Ramos, Gian C.; Romano, Silvina M. “Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration”. *Latin American Perspectives*. 38:93, 2011, p. 104.

<sup>82</sup>United States Department of State. *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2011*, p.13.

American cities.<sup>83</sup> The escalation of violence as a policy has been part of Mexican counter-drug strategy since the 1980s, and this type of policy has always found support in the United States, who has funded, provided capacity-building, equipment and training. However, many argue that these approaches will neither stem the violence nor provide real border security.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, in recent studies conducted by international institutions such as the Global Commission on Drug Policy, it has been shown that “most of the illicit drugs consumed in the United States come through or from Mexico, and virtually all the revenue of Mexican drug-trafficking organizations comes from sales to the United States”.<sup>85</sup> Tackling this issue from the perspective of a problem that affects both countries would suggest a shared responsibility: while in Mexico the counter-drug policies are centered mainly on domestic production and illicit exports (and the ensuing violence and organized crime) in the U.S. policies attempt to shrink demand for these imports, and in this way to curtail consumption.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the supposed critical view to the ‘drug wars’ holds that a possible solution to this problem would be to increase legal availability of drugs – such as medicinal marijuana or and focusing on prevention and treatment of drug addiction, for instance the Global Commission on Drug Policy and former UN-Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Mexico is the most important trading partner and largest export market for all US Southern border states and ranks among the top five export destinations for thirty-six US states.<sup>87</sup> Thus, some analysts argue that the country has spent too little in its military initiatives in Mexico – compared to U.S. budgets for the Colombia Plan and with the estimated twelve to twenty-five

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<sup>83</sup> O'Neill, Shannon. *The Real War in Mexico: How Democracy Can Defeat the Drug Cartels*. **Foreign Affairs**. July/August 2009, Vol.88, N.4, p.3. Please note that this text was obtained at <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~kmcm/Articles/The%20Real%20War%20in%20Mexico.pdf> on 10 January 2010 and thus all the page references from this article contained in this paper refer to this particular online version of the article which may differ from the page references of the hard copy of the article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>84</sup> O'Neill, Shannon. *The Real War in Mexico: How Democracy Can Defeat the Drug Cartels*. **Foreign Affairs**. July/August 2009, Vol.88, N.4, p.4.

<sup>85</sup> Kleiman, Mark. “Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars”. *Foreign Affairs*. September/October 2011, Vol. 90, Issue 5, p. 89.

<sup>86</sup> Kleiman, Mark. “Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars”. *Foreign Affairs*. September/October 2011, Vol. 90, Issue 5, p.91.

<sup>87</sup> COUNCIL OF AMERICAN AMBASSADORS. *Mexico and the United States: A Strategic Relationship*. **The Ambassadors Review**. Spring 2012. Available at: <http://www.americanambassadors.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Publications.article&articleid=249>. Obtained on 21 May 2012.

billion dollars acquired yearly by Mexican cartels across the U.S. border – and argue that to “really overcome Mexico's security challenges, the United States must move beyond a short-term threat-based mentality to one that considers all these elements in the strategic relationship with its southern neighbor.”<sup>88</sup>

The United States and Mexico both regard the drug trafficking issue as a threat to each country’s national security.<sup>89</sup> The United States conceives its policy framework towards illegal drugs and transnational organized crime through bilateral, regional or multilateral strategies, such as the main United Nations drug, crime and corruption conventions. The United States Department of State affirms that its drug and crime control policy is integrated with the country’s broad foreign policy objectives, and aims to reduce drug consumption in order to improve overall public health and safety and deprive violent international criminal organizations of income.<sup>90</sup> In 2011, for instance, the U.S. Administration dedicated approximately ten billion U.S. dollars in federal funds to support drug demand reduction.<sup>91</sup> Recent studies show that in the United States, “with the exception of marijuana, use of most illegal drugs – due in large measure to the effectiveness of drug awareness and treatment programs – has dropped dramatically” and that current illicit drug use in has dropped by approximately one-third since the 1970s.<sup>92</sup>

More recently, the Obama Administration has declared an increase in collaborative efforts with local coalitions in countries like Mexico in order to prevent drug use and share national drug court experiences as model alternatives to drug-offense incarcerations, supported by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) of the Organization of American States (OAS). These organizations are in favor of international and regional collaboration for alternatives to incarceration, especially in

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<sup>88</sup> O'Neill, Shannon. The Real War in Mexico: How Democracy Can Defeat the Drug Cartels. **Foreign Affairs**. July/August 2009, Vol.88, N.4, p.5-6.

<sup>89</sup> UNITED STATES SENATE CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL. **U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations**. May 2011, p. 29.

<sup>90</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.14.

<sup>91</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.14.

<sup>92</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.14.

the Caribbean and Central America.<sup>93</sup>

The tone of the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, the main government document produced by the U.S. government on the subject, is sober yet maintains its stride on a high note. Mexico, it states,

“with support from the United States under the Mérida Initiative, has demonstrated its resolve to thwart brutal drug criminal enterprises operating within its borders. While the country is suffering from drug-related violence, Mexico in 2011 apprehended 22 high-profile drug traffickers. Mexico’s federal law enforcement has demonstrated a commitment and increasing capacity to strike all levels of sophisticated criminal entities to break down their ability to operate. Mexican bilateral law enforcement cooperation with the United States continues to strengthen”.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, the report affirms that “government successes continue to affect the transnational crime organizations’ narcotics-driven profits and drain their resources.”<sup>95</sup>

However, official discourse is countered in many ways by various strands of criticism regarding counter-drug policies content, means and objectives. Most critics argue that the ‘drug war’ could instead be referred to as a ‘drug deadlock’<sup>96</sup> and many analysts refer to it as a complete failure; in over forty-years of struggle, no major structural change has been reached. Outside and even inside some government circles, the argument that the ‘war on drugs’ has been a failure is recurrent<sup>97</sup>: “anyone with half an eye on the news knows that Mexico is in the midst of a drugs war, with rival cartels battling for control of a \$30 billion trade with the United

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<sup>93</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.14.

<sup>94</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.15.

<sup>95</sup>United States Department of State. **International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2012**, p.317.

<sup>96</sup> GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DRUG POLICY. **Report of the global commission on drug policy**. June 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Some examples of authors and organizations who share this view are: BENETT, Brian. US can’t justify its drug war spending. LA Times Online. 9 June 2011; BOWDEN, Charles. U.S.-Mexico “war on drugs” a failure. CNN. 31 March 2010; LOVEMAN, Brian (Ed.). **Addicted to Failure: U.S. Security Policy in Latin America and the Andean Region**. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006; NADELMANN, Ethan. Commonsense Drug Policy. **Foreign Affairs**, Vol. 77, 1998; LATIN AMERICAN COMMISSION ON DRUGS AND DEMOCRACY. **Drugs and Democracy: Toward a Paradigm Shift**. 2009; GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DRUG POLICY. **Report of the global commission on drug policy**. June 2011; GRILLO, Ioan. Mexico's drug war has brought terrifying violence to the streets and taken a dreadful toll of lives. **The Telegraph**. 29 January 2012; GOOTENBERG, Paul. Talking about the flow: Drugs, Borders and the Discourse of Drug Control. **Cultural Critique**, N.71, Winter 2009, p13-46.

States.”<sup>98</sup> Although some improvement has been achieved in terms of coca crop reduction<sup>99</sup>, for instance, a genuine decrease in consumption and production has not occurred, and the violence of the drug trade has not subsided. Despite increase in apprehensions and imprisonment of cartel leaders, once spotted trafficking routes and cultivation areas are quick to redistribute and reassemble into new smuggling patterns, in what is termed a ‘balloon effect’.<sup>100</sup>

Failure in the ‘war on drugs’ in Mexico can be measured in numbers: by the end of Felipe Calderón’s presidency in 2012, there have been over 80,000 deaths, 20,000 disappeared persons, approximately 200,000 people were driven from their homes, and hundreds of thousands more were victims of kidnappings, extortion, and general violence.<sup>101</sup> Calderón’s policies have produced disastrous results. They failed to thwart the country’s powerful criminal groups and led to a dramatic increase in grave human rights violations. Rather than strengthening public security, these abuses exacerbated a climate of violence, lawlessness, and fear.<sup>102</sup>

While statistics concentrate on effects rather than on causes of the issue, they may contribute to diverting attention from the North American responsibility in the violence of the drug trade. According to government studies, there are seven major drug cartels: Sinaloa Cartel, the Tijuana Cartel; Juárez Cartel; Gulf Cartel; La Familia Michoacana; Los Zetas; and Beltrán Leyva Organization.<sup>103</sup> According to Mexican investigative reporter Anabel Hernandez, who spent over five years researching Mexican drug cartels from the inside – and risking her own life – the administrations of Felipe Calderón and Vicente Fox have both adopted a “strategy” of

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<sup>98</sup> GRILLO, Ioan. Mexico's drug war has brought terrifying violence to the streets and taken a dreadful toll of lives. **The Telegraph**. 29 January 2012.

<sup>99</sup> UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. **World Drug Report 2011**. United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.11.XI.10, p.14-15.

<sup>100</sup> GLOBAL COMMISSION ON DRUG POLICY. **Report of the global commission on drug policy**. June 2011.

<sup>101</sup> Hernandez, Anabel (2013-09-10). *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords And Their Godfathers* (Kindle Locations 209-211). Verso Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>102</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Mexico's Disappeared*. February, 2013. ISBN: 1-56432-987-9, p.1.

<sup>103</sup> UNITED STATES SENATE CAUCUS ON INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL. **U.S. and Mexican Responses to Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations**. May 2011, p.18-19.

protecting the Sinaloa cartel.<sup>104</sup> The author argues that “semi-illiterate peasants like El Príncipe, Don Neto, El Azul, El Mayo, and El Chapo would not have got far without the collusion of businessmen, politicians, and policemen, and all those who exercise everyday power from behind a false halo of legality”.<sup>105</sup>

The statistical data presented by government sources and the media regarding the illicit drug trade between the United States and Mexico – total production, consumption, profits, billions of dollars spent in counter-drug policies and homicides related to the drug trade, amongst other numbers – are in themselves, in the most naked form, appalling. These statistics reveal ‘objective’ problems that need urgent solutions: adult and youth substance abuse, drug-related crimes and incarcerations, gang violence, corruption, etc. Due to this wide range of issues stemming from the drug trade, various kinds of approaches have been raised to tackle it, such as political economy perspectives, legal, environmental and development approaches, military and health-oriented approaches, amongst many others, all of which contribute to the debates and attempts to curb the global drug trade.

However, the vast majority of these approaches – circulating United States and international media, government circles, intellectuals and academics as well as civil society group discourses – that have been represented above, refer to the complex context of the illegal drug trade context as a ‘war on drugs’, in a manner which is automatic, swift and inconspicuously natural. At this point, perhaps even the careful reader will have been following this discussion without questioning the expression that has branded the entire intricate dynamics surrounding the illegal drug trade. To claim successes or to indicate failures in the ‘drug war’ is to perpetuate the convincing metaphor that has framed the prevailing discourse on drug trafficking and counter-drug policies. This metaphor has shaped political and academic debates, and can be seen to have constrained thought, discussions and arguments on the politics and violence that constitute this issue. The majority of conventional literature, the media and critical

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<sup>104</sup> Hernandez, Anabel (2013-09-10). *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords And Their Godfathers* (Kindle Locations 193-195). Verso Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>105</sup> Hernandez, Anabel (2013-09-10). *Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords And Their Godfathers* (Kindle Locations 183-185). Verso Books. Kindle Edition.

texts alike have departed from the idea of an existing ‘war on drugs’. This move is a clear example of the way in which a subjective interpretation is promoted to the level of objectivity – a notion explored at length in chapter 2 – and becomes the basic filter through which an issue is perceived.

### **The ‘philopoetics’ of *Miss Bala***

In this sense, departing from a deconstructionist approach aided by insights suggested by viewing the film *Miss Bala*, this section seeks to disrupt these textual elements and reified concepts that frame the ‘war on drugs’, historicizing the context of its emergence and pervasiveness and thus unveiling the exclusionist practices that have institutionalized these meanings and marginalized other possibilities for analysis.

In itself, the term war is extremely misleading in this context as it is historically packed with meanings such as violence, belligerence, confrontation, combat; in sum, suggests a state of armed conflict. The discussion on the meaning and history of war is gigantic and has been the subject of uncountable works in anthropology, sociology, social science, cultural studies, feminist studies, economics, etc. For hundreds of years, this subject has been studied by thinkers from Thucydides, Machiavelli, Kant, Hobbes, Rousseau, Clausewitz, Hans Morgenthau, Hedley Bull, Edward H. Carr, John Keegan, Michael Shapiro, amongst many others, who have greatly influenced the discipline of international relations as a whole. The subject is so vast and complex that it becomes unfeasible to explore it with the time and space it requires in the context of this paper. This fact in itself, however, attests to the argument that branding an intricate and complex international political dynamics such as the illegal drug trade as a war can be deceptive, thought-constraining and, most importantly, can legitimize the use of force to counter it.

This analysis departs precisely from this locus of resistance to the political and theoretical move of framing the illicit drug trade dynamics as a ‘war on drugs’, the privacy of a girl’s bedroom.

### Still N.1.



*Miss Bala's* opening scene begins as the day begins, before the spectator has had a chance to wake up his mind and his senses to the film. For the entire first minute of the movie the viewer stare at a wall; a wall covered in collages of fashion magazines and pictures of iconic actresses, where a small dirty mirror hangs. At the break of dawn, when darkness still reminisces enough to cloud viewing, a young woman is getting ready to leave her home for the day. The spectator's first contact with Laura, the protagonist, is through her reflection. She kisses her younger brother goodbye and sets out for the city.

### Still N.2



Arriving at the beach, Laura stops and leans over a wall and contemplates the sea. Soft colors and the sunshine glistening on her hair form an unlikely frame for the title of the film as it appears in bold red letters on the screen, with the speed and intensity of fired ammunition. Already the viewer is confronted with the asynchrony between the pretty picture of a beautiful



young woman who dreams of a brighter future and the stark hostility suggested by the name given to her by Naranjo, *Miss Bala* (Miss Bullet).

### Still N.3



The viewer accompanies Laura as she meets a friend who takes her to an audition for a beauty contest, where she has a long shot at winning the title of Miss Baja California. Laura is shy, clumsy, poorly dressed and has “manos de serviente,”<sup>106</sup> as remarks the event’s organizer. *Miss Bala* is not a film about the military confrontation between government forces and drug cartels in Mexico. It does not explicitly address the United States participation in the conflict. The storyline is not focused on the drug trade. The film unfolds primarily as the struggle of a young woman who wishes to pursue a dream as a way out of her dismal everyday life but gets tangled in a network of criminal activity. It is, however, precisely the imprint left on Laura’s body by the forces at work in the spaces within which she moves and the multiplicity of subject positions created within those spaces that make Laura an aesthetic subject<sup>107</sup>, allowing for deep reflections about the “the complex political habitus” in which she, as the main aesthetic subject in the film, is embedded.<sup>108</sup> These subject positions and spaces will enable alternative criticisms to the United States counter-drug policies, which will be examined hereafter.

As explored in the previous section, traditional modern distinctions between image and reality, experience and representation, fact and fiction have determined what counts and what does not count, and what can or cannot be taken seriously by political science scholarship.

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<sup>106</sup> In English, “hands of a house servant”.

<sup>107</sup> As defined by Michael Shapiro.

<sup>108</sup> Shapiro, Michael J. **The Time of the City**, London: Routledge, 2010, p.7.

Resisting the compartmentalization of thought and binary seclusion between modes of thought<sup>109</sup> that constrain certain themes from political debates and determines who has legitimacy to speak about what, following the materializations of encounter offered by the political aesthetics of *Miss Bala* can perform the deconstruction and displacement of conceptual orders within which the discourse that insists on treating the illegal drug trade as a ‘war on drugs’ rests and perhaps enable the emergence of suggestions for alternative modes of inquiry with which to tackle this set of issues.

Therefore, this paper does not ask *what* politics is but instead – as suggested by Jacques Rancière – *when* and *where* is politics and *how* subjects experience political life.<sup>110</sup> In other words, the analysis will focus on the moments and places where the drug-trafficking occurs and how these dynamics affect subjects’ bodies and livelihoods. Departing from this deeper ontological debate will allow for the disruption of the dominant political consensus that delineates the boundaries between life and art, politics and life, and public and private domains. In other words, the arts, and in this case, films, are not mere illustrations of ideological struggles but the very playing field of this struggle.<sup>111</sup> Rejecting premises that structure knowledge and divide visual art from the world of ‘vital concerns’ and of legitimate political issues of grandeur<sup>112</sup> it is possible to pluralize what can come into view and be included in political agendas.

*Miss Bala* performs interference as it investigates that which cannot be grasped through narrative and cannot be represented by representational forms.<sup>113</sup> Through “discontinuous and refractive interference,”<sup>114</sup> by confronting its own thought and lingering on what cannot and yet

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<sup>109</sup> See Casarino, Cesare, Philopoesis: A Theoretico-Methodological Manifesto. **Boundary 2**, Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2002. Author uses the metaphor of a spring board in order to argue that these binaries are often the framework of reasoning but should actually be points from which to begin an analysis and not end them.

<sup>110</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by: Stephen Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010, p.27.

<sup>111</sup> Žizek, Slavoj. ‘The lesson of Rancière’. Rancière, Jacques. **The politics of aesthetics**. London: Continuum, 2000, p.77.

<sup>112</sup> Rancière, Jacques. **The politics of aesthetics**. London: Continuum, 2000, p.17.

<sup>113</sup> Casarino, Cesare; Philopoesis: A Theoretico-Methodological Manifesto. **Boundary 2**, Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2002, p.66.

<sup>114</sup> Casarino, *ibid.*, 2002, p.66.

must be thought,<sup>115</sup> the film can be seen to blur the zones of contact between image and reality, silence and dialogue, fact and fiction, attempting to unveil what it cannot represent.<sup>116</sup>

Naranjo's style has been greatly debated by the media and general public. The film is shot, almost entirely, through a "steadicam-driven style that nearly always maintains a level-headed distance from the action."<sup>117</sup> *Miss Bala* leads the viewer to think the unthought as it speaks the unspoken and shows what cannot be seen, both through minimal use of dialogue and by placing the action outside the frame. In films, the framed image captures a portion of reality and space, making a statement about what is left out, the invisible prolongation of the visible, or what is commonly called the 'out of field'. Both the 'in field' and 'out of field' are equally important for the definition of the filmic space in narrative and representative cinema – cinema which tells a story situated in an imaginary universe materialized by representation.<sup>118</sup> The 'in field' is where montage takes place, or the organization of film planes in certain conditions of order and duration.<sup>119</sup> In this way, the bases of cinematographic language are the framings, camera movements, lighting and montage.<sup>120</sup> In *Miss Bala* these four very basic resources are explored to their fullest, in a way that the film 'feels' as if it were almost bare: there are no amazing visual effects, the scenery is not particularly striking, the dialogue has no special place and is almost always obstructed by outside noise.

It can be argued that Gerardo Naranjo's framing, camera movements, lighting and montage are in style what Jacques Aumont calls expressionist. According to Aumont, expressionism in cinema is composed of three key features. First, the refusal to imitate: representation is an invitation to understand what is represented; it emphasizes what goes beyond representation. The represented image is a device that allows the 'reality' that is being represented to go further, to

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<sup>115</sup> Casarino, 2002, Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>116</sup> Casarino, Cesare; Philopoesis: A Theoretico-Methodological Manifesto. **Boundary 2**, Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2002, p.71-73.

<sup>117</sup> DEBRUGE, Peter. *Miss Bala*. **Variety**. 13 May 2011.

<sup>118</sup> AUMONT, Jacques et.al. **A estética do filme**. Translated by Marina Appenzeller. Campinas: Papirus, 1995, p.24.

<sup>119</sup> AUMONT, Jacques. **A imagem**. Campinas: Papirus, 1993, p.54.

<sup>120</sup> AUMONT, Jacques. **A imagem**. Campinas: Papirus, 1993, p.191.

“achieve the representation of the invisible, the indescribable, the transcendent.”<sup>121</sup> The second feature is the exacerbation of subjectivity, or the necessity to ascribe limitless value to a certain subjective affect in the film. The third feature is the importance placed on the material, the emphasis on colors, lines, contrast and other material expressions of the visual.<sup>122</sup>

Naranjo’s expressionism can be outlined according to these three characteristics. His framing goes beyond representation as, his choice of subjects to include in the frame only make it more painful for the viewer to feel, imagine, and attempt to grasp what is left out. His camera movements exacerbate the affects of anxiety and claustrophobia, as the spectator sees Laura and the universe she is in throughout the majority of the film as if she or he were literally following her. This particular move has a dual function: at the same time that the viewer is invited to emulate Laura’s spatio-temporal experiences, because the focus is mostly on her, the viewer never has a clear idea about what exactly is going on around her. This affect is compounded by Naranjo’s choice of color and lighting: throughout most of the film browns and greys predominate, so that the audience can never see clearly as shapes and lines become blurred. As a blogger notes, in *Miss Bala*,

“the frame becomes so claustrophobic, almost like the time you are sitting on the rear seat of a bike holding something big, say a carrom board, which's basically obstructing your vision. It is a classic moment of anxiety. Here in *Miss Bala* almost everything is happening off-screen, literally and figuratively, and the resultant tension is almost unbearable. I watched the film over a good 4 hours. Trust me, I needed that time.”<sup>123</sup>

Montage symbolism introduces to the spectator an abstract concept without having to use explicit resources.<sup>124</sup> In *Miss Bala*, montage symbolism parallels a recurring technique used by Naranjo: the camera looks at other characters and to their environments through the eye of the protagonist. Through such framings it is possible to “see the space of action from within, through

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<sup>121</sup> AUMONT, Jacques. **A imagem**. Campinas: Papirus, 1993, p.294-295.

<sup>122</sup> AUMONT, Jacques. **A imagem**. Campinas: Papirus, 1993, p.295.

<sup>123</sup> NAIDU, Satish. Comment to post *Miss Bala*, 12 March 2012. **Scribbles and ramblings**: book/film reviews blog. Obtained on: 23 March 2012. Available at: <http://likhna.blogspot.com.br/2012/03/miss-bala.html> .

<sup>124</sup> XAVIER, Ismail (Ed.). **A experiência do cinema**. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal Ltda., 1983, p.64.

the eyes of the *dramatis personae*, and know how they feel in it,” and in this way, frames that changes constantly provide the spectator with the feeling that he himself is moving.”<sup>125</sup>

**Still N.4**



Scene where Laura first meets Lino, the drug cartel leader.

**Still N.5**



Laura, as she arrives in the pageant and being taken by the event's organizer to where she will need to change and prepare to appear in public.

**Still N.6**

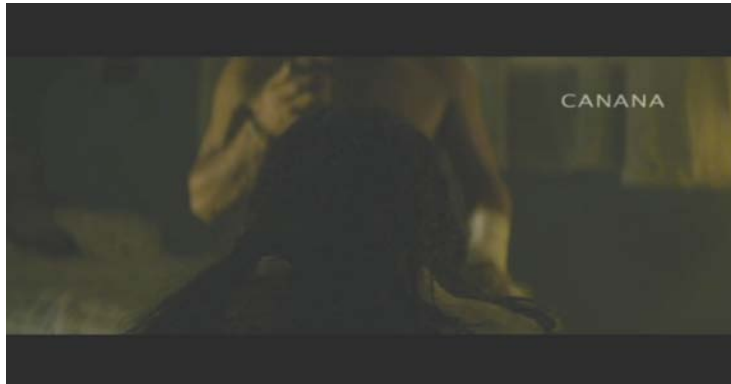


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<sup>125</sup> BALÁZS, Béla. In: \_\_\_\_\_. **A experiência do cinema**. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal Ltda., 1983, p. 97-98.

Laura driving a car following orders given by “Lino” back into Mexico after smuggling money into the United States to buy weapons.

**Still N.7**



Laura in her room, undressing Lino’s wounds.

**Still N.8**



Laura onstage, waiting for the result of Miss Baja California’s pageant.

The character thus becomes the “centrifugal being”: the movement of the camera reinforces the tendency to expand, it transforms what is out of the frame – the out of field – into a space directly encompassed by the camera through the metaphor of the camera movement. This resource establishes the idea that there is a world independent to the camera.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> XAVIER, Ismail. **O discurso cinematográfico: a opacidade e a transparência.** Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2005, p.22.

## Still N.9



While in the back of a truck, the camera offers a 360-degree angle showing the viewer exactly and only what Laura can see. Laura becomes the centrifugal being, allowing the audience to experience what the character is feeling from within and troubling her/his sense of space and time as she/he can no longer be separated from the scene; the line between subject (spectator) and object (film and its characters) is blurred.

The anxiety and tension produced by the aesthetic qualities in *Miss Bala* provide the backdrop for the most invisible and at the same time naked form of acquiescence about all victims in the film, especially Laura. From the very first few minutes into the story when Laura encounters the thugs that will force and constrain her movement during the entire picture, she maintains a type of posture that remains surprisingly steady throughout. She is ordered in and out of houses, cars, clothes, she smuggles money and arms, yet she does not question any orders, she does not protest or scream out. Laura silently and complacently acquiesces. Although despair lingers like a heavy cloud suffocating Laura and her surroundings, it is barely seen on her face or heard in her voice. Invoking the unseen and provoking the unconscious is what the film's language attempts to do in order to emphasize that "in Mexico", as argues Naranjo, "the bad things are already in our hardrive."<sup>127</sup>

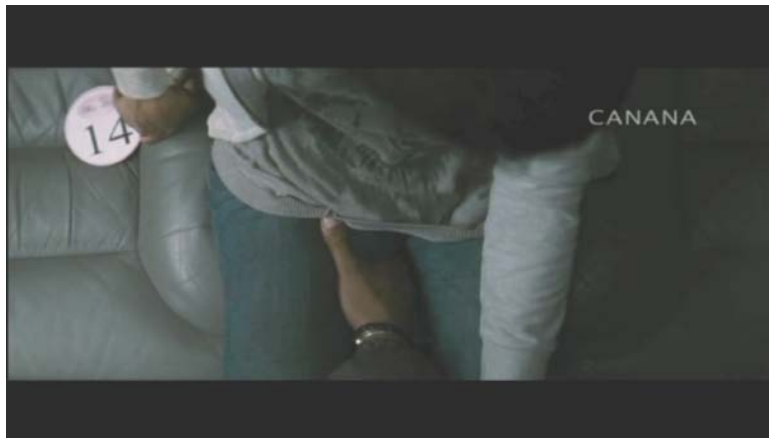
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<sup>127</sup> MALKIN, Elizabeth. In the Crossfire of the Mexican War on Drugs: Gerardo Naranjo's *Miss Bala* reflects Mexican drug war. *New York Times*. 13 January 2012.

**Still N.10**



**Still N.11**



**Still N.12**



The three stills above attest to the permanent acquiescence suggested by the camera's focus on the out-of-field – strongly referring to what cannot be seen or heard. This form of acquiescence defines the way through which Laura carries herself throughout the spaces she occupies and puts the viewer uncomfortably in her place, inside the daily lives of millions of



people who suffer the workings and violent consequences of the ‘war on drugs’, resulting from the confrontation between criminal organizations and American and Mexican law enforcement agencies. This defining feature of Laura’s character when analyzed as an aesthetic subject is a glaring reminder that “what feeds despair here more than the daily violence, though, is the suspicion that nobody in charge has the ability, the will or the integrity to defeat the criminals and the corruption that supports them.”<sup>128</sup> As argued by Dickens and Fontana, the stereotyped image of the ‘war on drugs’, serves to “disguise individuals’ total lack of control over the external forces that have invaded, penetrated, and dispersed their bodies”.<sup>129</sup>

However, drawing viewers into the daily occurrences where this lack of control can be felt calls attention to often-disregarded aspects of the situation in Mexico. While the official U.S. discourse claims that increased cooperation between the Mexican and American governments has resulted in increased successes in thwarting illicit drug exports and Mexican cartels’ activities, Laura as a “centrifugal being” and the out-of-field anxiety imposed on the viewer may suggest fault lines within this discourse. In Mexico, most of the violence is invisible, as it is invisible in the audience’s grasp of Laura’s experience. As it can be seen on the previous stills, in still N.10 Laura is hidden underneath a bathroom counter and the criminal’s face cannot be seen. In stills 11 and 12 Naranjo strongly suggests Laura is being molested but the spectator cannot see – in the first scene – her suffering – or in the second – the degree of violence being imprinted onto her body.

This ‘invisibility’ becomes unbearable as it is penetrated by Laura’s patient lack of protest and attests to a major aspect of the appalling situation in Mexico: civilian lack of faith in authorities to provide public security. Illegal activities carried out by drug cartels have touched virtually every sphere of public life in Mexican cities most affected by the drug trade, from extortions of small businesses to blockades of major highways.<sup>130</sup> The policies deployed to

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<sup>128</sup> Gerardo Naranjo’s comment in MALKIN, Elizabeth. In the Crossfire of the Mexican War on Drugs: Gerardo Naranjo’s Miss Bala reflects Mexican drug war. **New York Times**. 13 January 2012.

<sup>129</sup> DICKENS, David R.; FONTANA, Andrea. **Postmodernism and Social Inquiry**. London: UCL Press, 1994, p.54.

<sup>130</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Neither Rights, Nor Security**: Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico’s “War on Drugs”. 9 November 2011, p.4.

counter this violence are extremely aggressive in themselves: more than 50,000 soldiers are currently involved in large-scale counter-narcotics operations across Mexico. Where they are deployed, these soldiers have been given many of the responsibilities of both police and prosecutors, such as patrolling neighborhoods, responding to shootouts, investigating individual crimes to gathering intelligence on criminal groups, amongst other functions. However, civilian oversight of the military's operations has been reduced and public security has not succeeded in reducing violence, but has resulted in a dramatic increase in grave human rights violations.<sup>131</sup>

As the Human Rights Watch Report on Mexico's dramatic situation asserts,

“not only do human rights violations in themselves undermine the rule of law, but they also can be counterproductive in reducing violence, dismantling criminal networks, and building the public confidence in institutions that is critical to effective counternarcotic efforts. Since the outset of Calderón's “war on drugs,” violent crime has skyrocketed; abusive policing has undermined the investigation and prosecution of criminal suspects; and widespread abuse and corruption has antagonized civilians who otherwise could provide security forces with crucial information.”<sup>132</sup>

Moreover, during his presidency Felipe Calderón repeatedly argued that concerns over the scale of violence in Mexico are overblown, affirming that the country's homicide rate is reasonably lower than several countries in Latin America – such as Brazil and Colombia.<sup>133</sup> However, the overall homicide rate provides an incomplete picture of violence in Mexico, because drug-related violence produces disproportionate effects on different regions. For example, roughly a third of all homicides tied to organized crime in Mexico in 2010 occurred in just five cities, by the government's own figures<sup>134</sup>. Therefore, a more adequate reading of the graveness of the situation can be found when examining homicide rates in specific states and cities, which have all increased in the last few years. For example, in Ciudad Juárez the rate of killings per 100,000 inhabitants increased from 14.4 in 2007, to 75.2 in 2008, and to 108.5 in 2009. With this

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<sup>131</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Neither Rights, Nor Security**: Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico's “War on Drugs”. 9 November 2011, p.5.

<sup>132</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Neither Rights, Nor Security**: Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico's “War on Drugs”. 9 November 2011, p.14.

<sup>133</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Neither Rights, Nor Security**: Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico's “War on Drugs”. 9 November 2011, p.15.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.15.

information it becomes clear that Ciudad Juarez's homicide rate in 2009 was approximately seven times that of Mexico's national rate, but also that it is one of the highest in the world, greatly exceeding rates such as Rio de Janeiro's and Medellín's.<sup>135</sup> Ciudad Juarez is one of the deadliest in the world, with 190 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>136</sup>

Furthermore, according to multiple media reports, current Mexican president Peña Nieto laid out a security plan with the objective of focusing more on reducing crimes against ordinary citizens – such as murder, kidnapping, and extortion - than pursuing the leaders of violent drug cartels.<sup>137</sup> However, most Mexican citizens are not confident that crimes reported will be in fact investigated, or, worse still, fear that local law enforcement and justice departments may be infiltrated by organized crime and that they will suffer direct violence from reporting criminals. Distrust in authorities and widespread abuses by security forces, only serve to the consolidate public's lack of faith in Mexican and U.S. policies deployed throughout in the country.<sup>138</sup>

### Still N.13



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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p.15.

<sup>136</sup> TUCKMAN, Jo. VULLIAMY, Ed. Mexico's drug wars rage out of control. **The Guardian**. 24 March 2010.

<sup>137</sup> Fabian, Jordan. "Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto Outlines New Drug War Plan", *Fusion*, October 11th 2013, <http://fusion.net/leadership/story/mexico-president-enrique-pena-nieto-charts-drug-war-12122>, accessed November 4th 2013.

<sup>138</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. **Neither Rights, Nor Security**: Killings, Torture and Disappearances in Mexico's "War on Drugs". 9 November 2011, p.16.

**Still N.14**



**Still N.15**



One of the main constant features of *Miss Bala* is a pervasive feeling of tension that muddles the spectator's sense of time. Even though scenes unfold chronologically, day and night clearly identified – the story takes place in no more than a couple of days – the lack of clear dialogues, the subdued lighting and sound effects produce a sense of discomfort (muffled car sounds, shooting, engines running, etc.), so that the audience never has a clear sense of what is exactly happening to Laura. A clear example of this is set out in the three stills above, in a sequence in which the viewer sees Lino's (the gang leader) car park outside what is suggested to be a bus station. As Lino leaves the car and comes back holding Laura, the camera remains in the

car so that the spectator cannot be sure of what is taking place. This scene is characterized by what film scholars call ‘decoupage’. Decoupage refers to the way through which scenes in a film are grouped into sequences. Where decoupage renounces continuity, totality and systematization, the film is oriented by an ambiguous reference point, or rather does not follow a single referent object, and the notion of sense-making is replaced by critical discourse. It disrupts illusions of the possibility of consciousness, teleology and representation from perception, and performs the critical deconstruction of the system of representation.<sup>139</sup>

Decoupage disrupts senses of identification, established hierarchies, discourses and genres, as it reintroduces subjects into the field of perception and reveals the “arbitrariness of the distribution [of social activities] for political participation and artistic practice.”<sup>140</sup> In *Miss Bala*, decoupage is a frequent resource used by Naranjo, which strongly suggests that the film is more focused on processes than on substance. For instance, the film is not structured through the unfolding of dialogue; when characters do speak their voices are muffled by the sounds going around them. In this way, the viewer is plagued by a sense of discomfort because she/he cannot achieve a comprehensive grasp of the storyline as there is in fact no stable narrative. Subdued lighting and blurry images contribute to the film’s lack of systematization of reality and maintenance of an ambiguous reference point – even though in many scenes the viewer follows Laura’s back, in just as many the focus of the camera is not on character’s faces but also parts of their bodies and objects such as cars, walls and mirrors. This deconstruction of a system of representation strongly emphasizes the importance of process versus substance in *Miss Bala*: the film is not about US-Mexico military relations, per se, as information about the violence caused by the drug trade and military measures deployed to counter it are received in the same disjointed way as the audience understands what is going on.

The concept of the deconstruction of the system of representation is essential to unmask a critical aspect of what is deemed by the American government as the ‘war on drugs’. Both the governments of Mexico and the United States have demonstrated a need to justify military

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<sup>139</sup> XAVIER, Ismail. **O discurso cinematográfico: a opacidade e a transparência**. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 2005, p.146-147.

<sup>140</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. CORCORAN, Stephen (Ed., transl.). London: Continuum, 2010, p. 5.

actions and to portray the ‘war on drugs’ as a battle between good and evil with no gray areas in between.<sup>141</sup> In order to make the rhetoric effective it has been necessary to villainize certain actors, characterizing them as the perpetrators of ‘evil’. However, evil and good are moral categories, wholly dependent on judgment and therefore not subject to political contestation. From the moment this issue is spoken of in moral terms, it is driven out of political debate and it becomes more difficult to speak of causes and consequences. Laura Carlsen, for instance, argues that this situation is clearly exemplified by the actions of the Armed Forces in Mexico, which acts within a war framework indicating as the main objective the annihilation of an identifiable enemy. This translates into the fact that civilians are defined as suspected enemies, so arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions, the use of torture, and the excessive use of force are almost the norm.<sup>142</sup>

Because *Miss Bala* offers scenes that disrupt the spectator’s sense of understanding of a teleological storyline and emphasizes the disjointed processes that pervade the film, it sets the stage for alternative critical inquiry. Where is the focus of the camera – in the main characters, in their surroundings, in Laura or the gangsters? At the same time that Laura is victimized – she suffers molestation, violence and is forced to carry out criminal actions – she is also complacent in terms of what is happening around her, because she accepts the money and the help in the pageant from the gang leader. How does this relate to the role of citizens experiencing the conflict and to the audience, also experiencing the conflict through the media, the news, and other personal accounts? If gangsters, Mexican and U.S. authorities are villainized, can there really be a distinction between good and evil, between clear adversaries in a supposed ‘drug war’? How does the concept of a ‘drug war’ depoliticize the debate and evade the questions of responsibility of all those involved – directly or indirectly – in this conflict, such as drug dealers, police, government officials, citizens and drug users?

In order to tackle this question, Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the affection-image is crucial. According to the author, the affection-image is comprised by the close-up, the magnification of

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<sup>141</sup> STOUT, Robert J. Do the United States and Mexico really want the Drug War to Succeed? **Monthly Review**. January 2012, Vol.63, Issue 8, p.42.

<sup>142</sup> CARLSEN, Laura. Mexico’s False Dilemma: Human Rights or Security. **Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights**. Vol. 10, N.3, Spring 2012, p.147.

the face, which gives an affective reading of the whole film. The close-up provides the magnification of the subject, forming an intensive series that mark the ascent to a critical instant. Its principal feature is to focus on the micro-movements of the subject of the close-up, to show that the moving body loses its movement and this immobile unity constitutes the affect.<sup>143</sup> In *Miss Bala*, this takes place with the direct interference of Gerardo Naranjo, telling actress Stephanie Sigman to “show everything with the eyes.”<sup>144</sup>

Close-ups on Laura’s face are less frequent in *Miss Bala* than scenes that either focus on the out of field or follow the character from behind in order to give the viewer a sense of direct experience. However, when close-ups are indeed performed they emphasize the magnification of Laura’s agony and despair, always subdued by her acquiescence and passivity. As suggested by Deleuze, these moments of magnification of the subject mark the ascent of critical instances, and are examples of the ‘materialism of encounter’ that define and suggest deep reflections into the U.S.–Mexico situation. The instances of materialism of encounter are, as suggested by Michael Shapiro, moments in which the multiplicity of spatio-temporal realities and positions of the aesthetic subject reveal their “complex political habitus”. Because such instances of materialism of encounter reveal sites without fixed temporal and spatial locations but instead variable events and “fluxes of interrelation”, they reflect social inconsistencies inflecting the characters’ bodies that cannot be expressed adequately through discursive representations; for example, ‘bodily compartments’ such as hand movements, walking or conversational contexts, e.g. speaking styles and intonations. The cinematic form of framing these types of encounters are poetic operations that establish the visibility of certain forces that illuminate beings, images, concepts and events, shedding light on zones of thought previously obscured by discursively represented realities.

There are two particular types of materialism of encounters in *Miss Bala* that are relevant to this study: mobile car scenes and dynamics of dressing/undressing, both of which will be

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<sup>143</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. **Cinema 1: the movement-image**. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press, 1986, p.87.

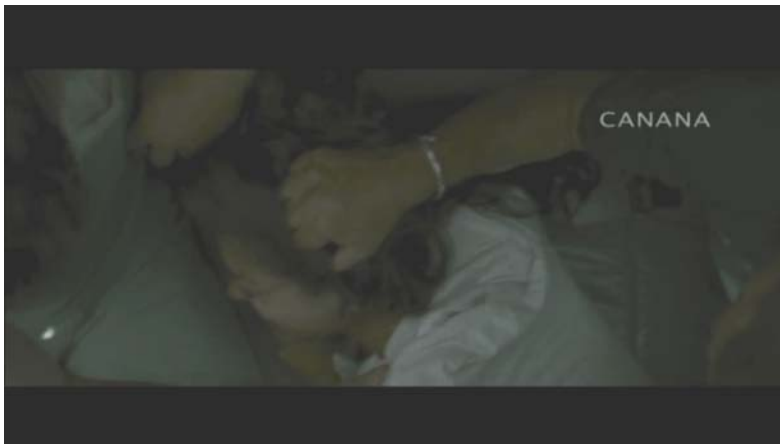
<sup>144</sup> GANOZA, Daniela. Miss Bala Interview with Gerardo Naranjo, Diego Luna and Stephanie Sigman. **Univision News**. Available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFXqWIB7\\_RM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFXqWIB7_RM). Obtained on: 22 January 2012. Interview.

explored. There are at eleven main scenes in cars and nine where Laura is being told do undress and/or dress, as will be shown below.

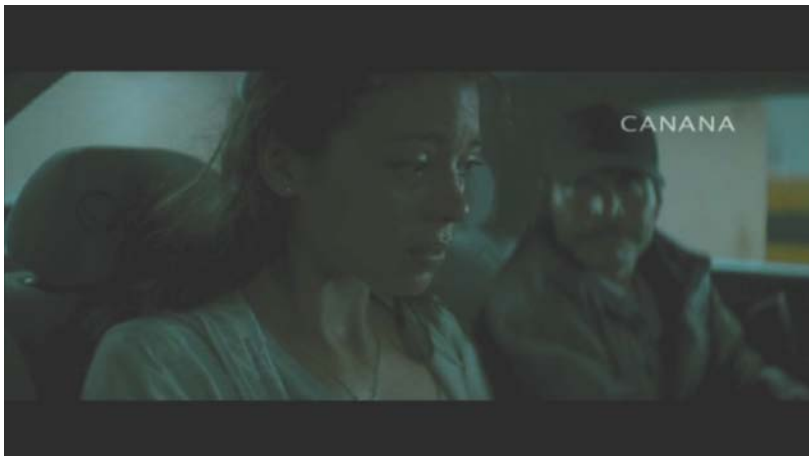
**Still N.16**



**Still N.17**



**Still N.18**





Still N.19



Still N.20



Still. N.21



Still N.22



Still N.23



Still N.24



**Still N.25**



**Still N.26**



Laura is forced in and out of cars, where she stands in different positions: at times she is kidnapped, at others she sits in the back seat as a regular passenger, and even has to drive in some situations. The multiplicity of these mobile sites where Laura is situated throughout the film can be seen to illuminate the fluxes of interrelations between herself and the police, authorities and cartel members. These encounters suggest the blurry and changeable boundaries between the roles of passenger, victim, driver and point to the unreliability of fixed hierarchies of meaning such as passive/active, causes and effects. The dynamic interplay between social roles, whose fluidity is emphasized by the fact that all of Laura's encounters in cars are mobile, can be considered a symbol of the "erosion of the rule of law and the systematic violation of human rights in the context of the armed conflict caused by the drug war" which has created a

bottomless crisis in Mexican society, “one whose causes and effects are not only ill-defined but often purposely obscured.”<sup>145</sup>

In this way, analyzing the drug trafficking situation beyond the US-Mexico border and placing the focus on subjects rather than on war adversary dichotomies and attempting to place blame on either side of the conflict may lead to different conclusions.

The mobility of the encounters provided by the various car scenes suggests a significant rift in the element of cooperation strongly emphasized by the U.S. government regarding its interaction with Mexico in the fight against drugs. A multi-dimensional cooperative strategy integrating the Mexican and American foreign policies suggests that at the borders, the United States controls the passage of drugs and that Mexico aims to stop them from leaving the country. However, the irregularity, unpredictability and inconsistency offered by the many car scenes in *Miss Bala* break up this inside/outside duality, suggesting that the discourse of cooperation and protection of borders cannot account for the relationships and dynamics between drug cartels and government forces.

For instance, some analysts have suggested that the ‘war’ on drugs is not a war between states or between government and civil forces, but actually a ‘war’ on minorities. For instance, out of the 260,000 prisoners in the United States on non-violent drug charges, more than seventy percent are of black or Latino backgrounds.<sup>146</sup> Also, almost 80 percent of those sentenced for the possession of crack are African-Americans, even though most users and sellers of crack are not of African-American descent.<sup>147</sup> Approximately ten times more non-white people are in jail for drug related crimes, although whites use drugs at a much higher rate.<sup>148</sup> After forty years of raging a supposed war on drugs, the United States has spent over one trillion dollars; and, even though the Obama administration has publicly announced a ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to drug policy’ and sworn to treat drug use more as a public health than a security issue, it has increased

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<sup>145</sup> CARLSEN, Laura. Mexico’s False Dilemma: Human Rights or Security. **Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights**. Vol. 10, N.3, Spring 2012, p.146.

<sup>146</sup> HUFFINGTON, Arianna. The War on Drugs Is Really a War on Minorities. **Alternet**. 27 March 2007.

<sup>147</sup> NADELMANN, Ethan. Obama Takes a Crack at Drug Reform. **The Nation**. 13 September 2010.

<sup>148</sup> AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION. **ACLU & Elon James White: Just Say NO to the War On Drugs**. June 2011. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UqDunp0JTE>. Obtained on: 5 September 2011.

spending on interdiction and law enforcement since 2010.<sup>149</sup> According to Ethan Nadellman, in the Obama administration, “law enforcement and futile interdiction programs make up the large majority of drug war expenditures, as they have since the Reagan era”.<sup>150</sup>

Also, the dichotomy present in the U.S. discourse on cooperation implies the idea of control by the governments over the chaotic situation posed by the illicit drug trade. This dichotomy is shaken by the director’s astounding control of the camera, as it portrays the main character’s lack of control or fixed agency within her surroundings. Laura’s body is constantly appropriated in space and time: she is forced in and out of cars, houses and clothes, she has money strapped on to her waist, she is used as a mule for transporting guns and as a sexual gift to a high Mexican authority in a surprise ambush orchestrated by the drug cartel. Furthermore, Laura undresses at least nine times throughout the film. Similar to the volatile agency ascribed to the *dramatis personae* during the mobile car scenes, Laura at times dresses and undresses willingly and at other times is coerced into doing it. This pattern repeatedly gives the viewer a glimpse of the violence that is imprinted directly onto her body.

Laura’s body transits between the United States and Mexico: she crosses the border from and to Tijuana smuggling money and drugs, but she also zig-zags across her home and the streets of Mexico into the superficial world of beauty pageants and socialite parties. Laura first undresses in front of the viewer at the pageant, which she sees as a way out of her dull and simple lifestyle. The dream of beauty and fame, strongly associated to an American tradition, is transported swiftly onto this Mexican city’s reality.

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<sup>149</sup> OFFICE OF NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL POLICY. **The 2012 National Drug Control Strategy: Building on a Record of Reform.** 17 April 2012, p.1; ASSOCIATED PRESS. AP IMPACT: After 40 years, \$1 trillion, US War on Drugs has failed to meet any of its goals. **Fox News.**13 May 2012.

<sup>150</sup> NADELMANN, Ethan. Obama Takes a Crack at Drug Reform. **The Nation.** 13 September 2010.

### Still N.27



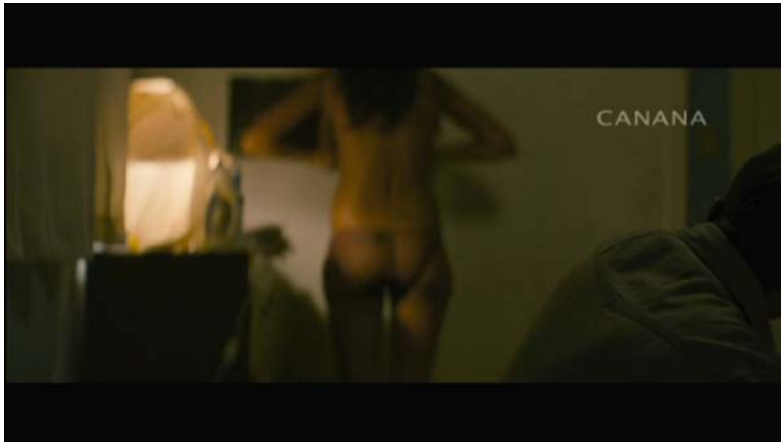
The second scene where Laura undresses takes place at an expensive store, where she has been given money by Lino to buy a new dress for the pageant.

### Still N.28



The third scene where Laura's semi-naked body comes to view is at her home, where she showers and is ordered to put on lingerie by Lino. Although Laura is not seen completely naked, the viewer is shocked by the vulnerability and helplessness suggested by the scene.

**Still N.29**



The next morning Laura is covered in grease and dollars, and then dressed up by Lino.

**Still N.30**



Her body is once again checked by the American official who takes the money from her and delivers the weapons she is to take back to Tijuana. After accomplishing her mission, Laura is taken back to the pageant where she puts on her special outfit to participate in the contest.

**Still N.31**



## Still N.32



After winning – to everybody’s surprise including herself – the title of Miss Baja California, Laura is taken by Lino who rapes her in the front seat of a car. The next morning, Lino takes her to have breakfast with the Mexican General as a prize, in order to stage an ambush. Once again Laura’s body is the stage upon which drug cartels and authorities clash.

The appropriation of Laura’s body throughout *Miss Bala* inspires deep reflections regarding the United State and Mexico’s political and military relations. Both American and Mexican policy makers have based their decisions on the premise that drug trafficking cartels present the gravest threat to Mexican security and would therefore be a security top priority. The counter-drug strategies carried out since President Calderón came into power were modeled on former U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1971, prioritizing the enforcement of laws prohibiting drug sale and consumption, ensuring harsh punitive measures for consumers and vendors and putting firmly in place interdiction strategies.<sup>151</sup>

However, many analysts argue that Mexican and American policies mimic the model of the “war on terror”, as it is “being mounted on the back of hype, half-truths, omissions and outright falsehoods.”<sup>152</sup> The federal government ensures a semi-permanent role for the Armed Forces despite the absence of a declared state of emergency, which threatens civil liberties and

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<sup>151</sup> CARLSEN, Laura. Mexico’s False Dilemma: Human Rights or Security. **Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights**. Vol. 10, N.3, Spring 2012, p.146.

<sup>152</sup> STOUT, Robert J. Do the United States and Mexico really want the Drug War to Succeed? **Monthly Review**. January 2012, Vol.63, Issue 8, p.43.



individual human rights.<sup>153</sup> The lack of transparency and accountability on arbitrary security policies is compounded by the fact that the U.S. has a dominant role in the training of Mexican troops and provision of weapons, but Mexican society has no control over the content of these U.S. policies devised especially for Mexican forces. Mark Kleiman asserts that although Mexico's current drug-trafficking problems relate almost entirely to exports to the United States, unfortunately, "the United States is central to Mexico's drug problem, whereas Mexico is incidental to that of the United States."<sup>154</sup>

## Conclusion

The constant appropriation of Laura's body signals the inconsistencies in the official discourse which aims to assure funding and public support for the military model of combating illegal drug trafficking instead of eliminating the violence that devastates Mexican society, despite the losses and overwhelming evidence of the failure of current strategies. As Laura Carlsen argues, "the language of exaggerated threats infantilizes society with fear as it clears the way for militaristic, patriarchal measures."<sup>155</sup> Focusing on the materialization of encounters taking place on Laura's body allows for the type of reflection suggested by Jacques Rancière. For a deeper grasp on the complex security situation that assails Mexico requires going beyond the investigation of *what* politics to the questions of *when* and *where* politics takes place, and *how* subjects experience political life.<sup>156</sup> Because Laura, gang members and authorities are always in motion and changing their trajectories, the viewer is invited to look everywhere and nowhere for causes and effects, perpetrators and victims of the violent counter drug policies and the processes of the illegal drug trafficking itself: "although the story unfolds in Tijuana, the license plates are

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<sup>153</sup> CARLSEN, Laura. Mexico's False Dilemma: Human Rights or Security. **Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights**. Vol. 10, N.3, Spring 2012, p.148.

<sup>154</sup> Kleiman, Mark. Surgical Strikes in the Drug Wars. **Foreign Affairs**. September/October 2011, Vol. 90, Issue 5, p.91.

<sup>155</sup> CARLSEN, Laura. Sorting Reality From Hype: Drug War Doublespeak. **Counterpunch**. 13 March 2009.

<sup>156</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Stephen Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010, 2010, p.27.

from California, the currency is dollars, the guns are imported from across the border, and the principal drug market is the United States. The carnage, however, remains in Mexico.”<sup>157</sup>

Naranjo’s framing is characterized by two main moves: steadicam-driven filming that follows the main character at an arm’s length; and the emphasis placed on the out-of-field scenes. These mechanisms allow the audience to be dragged into the film, to experience the character’s reality from within, as the interplay between these two resources allows the audience to see and hear what cannot be seen or heard, and therefore coerces it to feel and imagine. Both of these elements were crucial to show at length and with great intensity the anguish and anxiety that drive the entire film. Laura’s agony is further magnified through her incessant consent to all that surrounds her. The agony reflects a deep internalization of the rules and dynamics of the world of illicit drug trading and violence. However, Laura’s pain becomes the viewer’s pain and her consent and passivity are laid upon the viewer as well. This has important consequences for the way through which the audience copes with the fragments of reality presented in *Miss Bala*.

First, the framing of United States counter-drug policies as a ‘war on drugs’, as previously explored, is misguided and deceptive, and most importantly, a depoliticizing move. Tackling the drug trade from a warring perspective implies the existence of clear adversaries; the dichotomy between good (“us”) and evil (“them”), legitimizes the use of force to counter problems and a state of emergency that justify the gravest and most violent measures. The erasure of the boundary between the audience and the main character expressed in the agony that haunts the viewer throughout the film, however, enables the re-politization of the illegal drug trade issue, which involves much more than just military counter-drug policies. Whereas this issue is most often than not treated from the perspective of the public sphere – national and international security, public health – when Laura’s torment becomes the viewers’ torment the division between public and private is effaced. This suggests that the violent warlike U.S. policies should not be taken as natural and inevitable and that their content and form should always be at the forefront of the political debate. Laura’s body experiences drug cartels and government officials’ actions on a daily basis on the streets, in public spaces, in hotel rooms, in

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<sup>157</sup> SHEIKEN, Harley. Holding a Mirror to Mexico. **Berkley Review of Latin American Studies**. Fall 2011, Winter 2012, p.32.

her own home. She suffers their consequences in a variety of forms: her mobility is restricted, her rights as a citizen are usurped, her freedom as a woman is stolen, her emotional and psychological health is shattered. In other words, when the audience experiences this destruction, it also discovers that the problematic of the illegal drug trade is already inside her/him; that politicizing this issue means acknowledging that debate starts within.

Second, emphasis was given to two types of materialization of encounters found in *Miss Bala*: the extensive use of mobile car scenes and of Laura dressing and undressing, or being dressed and undressed. Laura's lack of control over her body – both through the way it is forced in and out of cars and clothes – attests to her vulnerability and to the multiplicity of roles she plays in the plot. These encounters served to deconstruct fundamental dichotomies that form the basis of the United States' discourse regarding its counter-drug policies. As explored in chapter 3, the United States affirms that drug cartels are a major threat to its national security, that a multifaceted policy of cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico and their agencies is paramount and that these military efforts have been effecting gradual positive change. The discourse on cooperation cannot, however, cope with the situation; the division between states, state departments, criminals and law enforcers are put into question by *Miss Bala*'s aesthetic features. When Laura at times is forcefully transported in backseats and at other times assumes the position of driver and crosses the border into the United States, delivering money to U.S. officials and bringing back arms to the drug cartel; when she is assaulted by D.E.A. agents who throw her on the ground and leave her unprotected, the categories used to frame the violence of the drug trade are broken and become irrelevant. Laura can be the victim and the perpetrator; the police can assume the roles of the law and the criminal and everything in between and around these supposedly fixed categories. These cinematic framings are able to deconstruct the hierarchical binaries that serve to depoliticize this issue and bring into visibility forces, images and concepts that have previously been ignored or obscured by realities represented by dominant discourse.

In sum, this paper has argued that acknowledging *Miss Bala* as a powerful and legitimate tool through which one can approach the multiple realities of the United States counter-drug policies in Mexico allows for alternative insights and criticisms to the official discourse on the

issue. The film's aesthetic elements analyzed in the previous chapter are offered as fresh mechanisms with which to re-politicize questions that have been kept outside of the political debate and break dichotomies that limit political thought.

The aim here has been to ask under a different light the following questions: what is the current dominant way of formulating the problems that surround the illegal drug trade and the ensuing violence that plague Mexico and the United States? What are the forces at work, namely, governmental discourses and policies, that allow those formulations to persist? Whose perspectives on problems gain recognition in the media and amongst specialists and laymen alike, and whose perspectives fail to be recognized? How do the conceptions, juxtapositions, and alternative subjects and their thought worlds – such as the universes of many 'Lauras' and 'Linos' that physically experience the violence of the drug trade daily, materialized onto their bodies – carry the power to disrupt the dominant modes of intelligibility? How can the study of these alternative subjects and thought worlds – whose perspectives are empowered once the 'world of the arts' is recognized as 'the world of vital concerns' – open up politically relevant spaces for these subjects? There are no easy answers to these questions, but lingering on them may allow for a modest step towards understanding these extremely complex issues through a fresh perspective; it may encourage approaching these issues in a manner that seeks primarily to protect the individuals whose bodies are implicated daily by official U.S. policies.

Finally, inspired by Michael Shapiro's own words, images can and do think politically. Photographs, art works and other forms of visual arts such as films have the ability to provoke the senses and mental faculties, poking wounds in a way that textual expression does not, with crucial consequences for thinking and acting politically. Therefore, consumers, public officials and all those who experience the problems associated with the illegal drug trade – directly or indirectly – are able to reclaim their roles as political subjects. While the reader may interact with the questions posed by this text throughout its pages, the dark and painful cinematic realities present in *Miss Bala* will certainly torment viewers long after the movie has ended.