

**ANOTHER HABITAT FOR THE MUSES:
THE POETIC INVESTIGATIONS OF MEXICAN FILM CRITICISM, 1896-1968**

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This dissertation delineates a tradition of writing on cinema in Mexico from the earliest years of the medium to the publication of the first comprehensive history of Mexican film. The works gathered here cover moments like the founding of Mexico's first film society, first film journal and first film school. They form a tradition that finds in cinema the inspiration to experiment with narrative and language, and therefore contains concepts from which theories about cinema's activation of creative thinking can be formulated. They propose an approach to cinema study that inhabits the unpredictable, accidental and improvisational aspects of knowledge through their commitment to offering aesthetic experiences. I call it a tradition of poetic investigations, which take the form of texts that belong to literary genres, such as the chronicle, the short story, the novel and the essay.

In those texts, the writers assay conceptions of the moving image that make it ideal to spark imagination and learning: early chroniclers like Amado Nervo and José Juan Tablada speak of the image as a ghost, tying its indeterminacy to an enigmatic dimension that only inventiveness can access; cinephile critics Salvador Elizondo and Jomí García Ascot latch onto cinema's eroticism and foreignness, respectively, to mine oceanic feelings for ideas for their written and cinematic works; professor José Revueltas turned to fiction and the essay to think of

the image as a monstrous wonder that instructed through awe; and fellow scholar Jorge Ayala Blanco found his literary voice in poetic criticism, practicing a form of imperfect ekphrasis that saw in the ways words and images depart from one another a site of productive, insightful verbal play. These writers exercise an ecological understanding of images, which become causal elements of the world instead of secondary reflections of referents. Because they promote the proliferation of concepts rather than their fixation, and because they argue for the viewer to open up to the images rather than master them, poetic investigations advocate for a non-colonial form of knowledge production that can enter in productive dialogue with the current canon of academic cinema studies.

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PREFACE

The longer a project goes on, it becomes a vessel that picks up more and more people in its journey. I look back at the gathering and feel fortunate. For their contributions, the following names deserve the most moving poetic expressions of gratitude.

The first thanks go to my committee members for their undying patience and vital comments during this process. From the early support and guidance that set the project on track to their forward-looking insights on the dissertation's post-university existence, their belief in my work was a wonderful gift. I must mention their part in making my graduate career so transformative as professors and scholars: I will always remember Marcia Landy's precision, Adam Lowenstein's audacity, Neepa Majumdar's generosity, and Josh Lund's illuminating love for my home culture.

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Two preliminary notes: throughout the text, the terms “film,” “cinema” and “moving image” are used interchangeably to refer to the latter concept. The surface reason is variety in the prose, and the underlying reason is to reflect that these terms encapsulate many media. “Film” is a term that survives even as celluloid takes a back seat to the digital image. Television and other works for all screens have cinematic elements and involve the motion of pictures. This text recognizes and works with the ambiguity of those terms because I believe the propositions I make are not medium-specific, even if the writings under study, by and large, think of cinema as projections in a theater. Finally, a note on translation: unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

1.0 INTRODUCTION: INSPIRATION, TRANSLATION AND CINEMA STUDIES

This project constellates and examines the works of Mexican writers who wrote about the moving image in literary genres – chronicles, short stories, poetry, novels and essays – from the earliest days of film in the nineteenth century to the late sixties, when the first comprehensive, book-length history of Mexican cinema was published. I argue that these texts are part of a tradition of thought that investigates cinema through its capabilities to inspire creative thinking and poetic language. These poetic investigations present non-instrumental ways to produce knowledge about the ontology of cinema. In taking a poetic approach to thinking about the moving image, I propose that these writers place cinema within an ecology of human activity where it acquires an autonomous life, which is what enables it to serve as inspiration. They also reveal how cinema's qualities activate visionary acuity and thus see the medium as inherently encouraging of invention. Apart from detailing these writers' contributions to the field, my purpose is to make steps toward increasing the visibility of Latin American voices in European- and North American- dominated discourses of film theory.

The perceived absence of which I speak is not absolute. The European and North American centers of the field have long been conversant with Latin American scholars. But the subject of those conversations tends to be Latin American cinema. Discussions of Latin American writers' critical and theoretical work usually falls within inquiries on regional film cultures and the subfield of area studies. Perhaps the best known and most-quoted such works are

the theories of “Third Cinema” put forth by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas,¹ or Glauber Rocha’s “aesthetic of hunger.”² What also made these writings relevant was the fact that the authors were filmmakers. Getino and Solanas directed the landmark, incendiary documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Argentina, 1968); while Rocha was one of the leading figures in Brazil’s *Cinema Novo*, with films like *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and *Antonio Das Mortes* (1969). These filmmakers are what Francesco Casetti would call “field” theorists of film – public intellectuals who bind together their theoretical, political and cultural interventions.³ But beyond their ties to their region, these writers were after farther-reaching principles. Although any work of the moving image is always already shot through with the characteristics of its historical, social and cultural context, research continues to locate attributes of the moving image that all such works potentially share. Arguments about what to make of the fact of the screen, the image’s connection to the world, the role of the apparatus and many other features of the film phenomenon remain in flux. Many of them make universal claims, hoping to encompass all of cinema, everywhere. Latin American writers have also attempted the composition of – as Warren Buckland puts it – “models of the unobservable underlying reality”⁴ of cinema. The realm of what Casetti calls “ontological theory”⁵ is the terrain from which Latin American writers have largely been missing.

A look at two recent volumes dedicated to film theory give a sense of the geographic spread of film ontology theories. The second edition of *Film Theory: An Introduction Through*

¹ See the inclusion of Solanas and Getino’s manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema” in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods, Vol. 1*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

² See Glauber Rocha, “The Esthetic of Hunger” in *Brazilian Cinema*, eds. Robert Stam and Randal Johnson, eds., trans. Johnson and Burnes Hollyman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Notably, Rocha first presented this essay in Genoa in 1965 during a Latin American cinema retrospective. While the films were the occasion for the event, the setting also helped the essay’s visibility outside Brazil.

³ Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945-1995*, trans. Francesca Chiostrri, Elizabeth Gard Bartolini-Salimbeni, Thomas Kelso (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 11.

⁴ Warren Buckland, *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.

⁵ Casetti, *Theories of Cinema 1945-1995*, 13.

the Senses (2015), edited by Dutch theorist Thomas Elsaesser and German scholar Malte Hagener; and *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice* (2015),⁶ from Canadian sociologist Murray Pomerance and American professor R. Barton Palmer, are two current overviews of the field that cover areas of aesthetics, semiotics, realism, embodiment and the digital, among others. They are also the work of renowned authorities in the discipline who could easily be listed alongside the authors they collect. These books gather the following writers between them, all names familiar to scholars studying film ontology before the advent of new media: Bazin, Lacan, Metz, Foucault, Deleuze, Chion, Rancière, (French), Münsterberg, Arnheim, Kracauer, Benjamin, (German), Lindsay, Cavell, Bordwell, Thompson, Gunning, Williams, Sobchack (American), Eisenstein, Vertov, (Soviet), Mulvey, (British), Balázs (Hungarian), Creed (Australian) and Žižek (Slovenia). The relatively recent inclusion of Lev Manovich (Russian), Sean Cubitt, (British), Laura Marks (Canadian-American), Niklas Luhman (German), Troben Grodal (Danish) and Patricia Pisters (Dutch) continue to find theories in the same regions and the same languages. There are two exceptions worth pointing out in Elsaesser and Hagener's book: their placement of Iranian-born Hamid Naficy and Laura Marks in their chapter on cinema and touch. Naficy, who writes in English, has for decades sustained his interest in Middle Eastern media and exilic and diasporic filmmaking (the latter of which is the subject of his presence in the book). As for Marks, even though she is represented through her writing on haptic perception, readers exposed to her work here should subsequently find her research on critical approaches to new media art based on classical Islamic thought.⁷ Yet the face of film ontology theory is overwhelmingly European and North American. I argue for the entry

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses. 2nd Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice*, ed. Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

⁷ See Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010). I will delve into Naficy's work in chapter 3.

of more Hispanic voices into the debates dedicated to theorizing the nature of the film phenomenon.

Masha Salazkina has pointed out that there is more to the absence of film theories from the global south in European and North American media studies than the lack of translations. Translating texts like the ones in the chapters below would certainly make their arguments available for scholars who would be more than open to them. That is certainly part of the problem in the cases I collect here, for none of them have been published in English. There is also the question of the institutional practices that shape the discipline's sense of what counts as knowledge about the moving image or, as Salazkina says, the forces that affect the "positionality" of such knowledge.⁸ Salazkina observes that European and North American academic film studies still has not fully reckoned with "the contradictions of globalization,"⁹ which have, among other effects, thrown the object of study – film – into disarray. Film populates the landscape alongside television, videogames, online video and, increasingly, technologies of virtual and augmented reality. The moving image's many forms seem to demand the incorporation of "film" into the larger concept of "media." For John Mowitt, "the movement from cinema to media is a symptom of globalization," with the resulting "disciplinary self-reflection" an opportunity to exercise "the enabling conditions of academic thought."¹⁰ What would be enabled, ideally, are texts, concepts and strategies that would guide the field through its own transformation in a world that is smaller in its accessibility (for those with the means to access it) and larger in its complexity. Salazkina, however, argues that the enabling has not really

⁸ Masha Salazkina, "Introduction: Film Theory in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization" in *Framework: the Journal of Cinema and Media* 56, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 334.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

happened, at least not when it comes to listening to theory and criticism from diverse geopolitical contexts:

Repression of the problems of the logic of globalization in the field is enabled by the failure of actual pedagogical and institutional practices to adapt to the propositions raised by decades of scholarly developments, [from] those which traversed the heated debates on Third Cinema in the 1980s, to the critical work of Orientalist and postcolonialist frameworks, which finally cleared the ground for discussions of World Cinema, Global Cinema and, indeed, Transnational Film and Media Studies in recent years. Despite the increasingly growing amount of important scholarship dealing with the geopolitical regions beyond Europe and North America that is being produced in the field, core film and media curricula have largely failed to integrate these developments in ways other than supplementally. The geographic contours of the discipline's historical imagination as it is encoded in its curricular practices remains the same, and film and media theory and criticism likewise culls its examples from the same restricted set of canonical works and figures within the same geopolitical space.¹¹

I thus aim to destabilize that canon with the addition of names from Mexican thinkers and works that show alternatives to the methodologies of the European and North American academies. As in Salazkina's case, the goal is not simply "coverage"¹² – trying to paint a full picture of the world in a single work is impractical, if not impossible. The objective is the "negotiation"¹³ of the power structures behind the current state of the field. Those dialogues would result in the substitution of a Eurocentric sense of universality for a "migratory"¹⁴ conception of knowledge production that is more faithful to how scholars experience research and learning today (that is, across linguistic, cultural and geographic borders); and in the highlighting of a series of methodologies that increase the incidence of discoveries. I share Salazkina's belief that including and contending with more voices would allow for more connections to be made, and give greater opportunity to innovations that would help the field grow. Invoking Mary Louise Pratt's concept

¹¹ Ibid., 334.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ James Clifford's term, quoted in *ibid*, 343.

¹⁴ Ibid, 332.

of “contact zones,” and her insight that meeting at contact zones demands a high degree of improvisation to surmount asymmetrical exchanges, Salazkina supports the inclusion of new voices to multiply cultural contact zones in cinema and media studies and thus multiply productive findings in it. “For if,” Salazkina says, “surrendering to the improvisational aspect to see what it can bring us, we do not assume smooth communication as the foundation and enabling condition of the object of research, we allow ourselves and our collaborators, students and colleagues more elbow room for experimentation and unforeseen results.”¹⁵ Improvising relies on imagination as much as on knowledge. It feeds off and exercises a creative spirit that also propels poetic inquiries.

The Mexican tradition of poetic investigations is not an academic discipline, I claim, but a literary institution, where cinema becomes a source of new ideas instead of an object of study, and learning is concerned with the unknown, unknowable and indescribable aspects of aesthetic experience, which in turn push our descriptive powers to evolve through finding solutions to problems of translation from images to words – the discipline’s perpetual contact zone. Because it is about generative environments (or the maximizing of opportunities to experiment with language), the poetic investigation is a patently inclusive form of knowledge production, and hence a means to come to terms with the contradictions of globalization. It opens the canonical study of film theory by virtue of both its strength in a non-Western tradition and the propositions it makes about how to carry out an inquiry, like letting cinema be an agent of inspiration rather than colonizing it through analysis that hopes to master it.

I will address the problems of translation throughout, chief among which, besides language, is the fact that I write as a scholar trained in North American universities. I need to return to the established canon and wrestle with its influence before questioning and trying to

¹⁵ Ibid., 343.

reconfigure it. The reconfiguration, I must remark, is based on addition, not replacement. Combined with the thoughts coursing through these pages is the hope of moving a bit closer to a planetary sense of our discipline, and for a mutually-enhancing dialogue between cinematic cultures both inside and outside university curricula.

1.1 CINEMA AND INSPIRATION

Many writers have called cinema a muse. More specifically, they've called it "the tenth muse," further increasing the allusions of the metaphor – in this case, referencing the nine Greek deities of inspiration. Jean Cocteau made that reference in a few occasions, none of which fully explain his rhetorical flourish.¹⁶ Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, in one of his earliest texts on the relatively new medium (from 1921), quotes Cocteau without delving too much into the inclusion of cinema among Mnemosine's daughters.¹⁷ At around the same time (1924), Polish author Karol Irzykowski equates cinema with inspiration to name his book *The Tenth Muse: Aesthetic Problems of the Cinema*, but he then puts forth a series of reflections on medium specificity and the relationship of the human to the world's matter (among many others), leaving the reader to discern many of the suggestions of his title.

A decade earlier, Ricciotto Canudo made the case for film's aesthetic value by adding it to a muse-adjacent pantheon. He offered that cinema "points the way" to "a superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythms of Time (Music and Poetry)," and so

¹⁶ Jean Cocteau. *The Art of Cinema*, eds. André Bernard and Claude Gautéur, trans. Robin Buss (London: Boyars, 1999), 23, 56, 123.

¹⁷ Alejo Carpentier, *El cine, décima musa* (Mexico City: Lectorum 2013), 25.

it represents “the birth of a sixth art”¹⁸ (which would become the seventh after his belated inclusion of dance). Arguably, the notion of film as art took hold in the cultural consciousness in a way that the muse metaphor did not. Both conceptualizations of cinema had solid, extensive theoretical underpinnings, but the conception of cinema as art resonated more successfully. Cocteau, Carpentier and Irzykowski made powerful arguments, but Canudo’s formulation proved far more lasting.

The circumstances that propelled those ideas through divergent histories deserves attention, but at the outset, it seems the reasons behind the views of cinema-as-art and cinema-as-muse are largely the same, so much so that Laura Marcus, in her own contribution to the study of the links between cinema and inspiration (also titled *The Tenth Muse*), starts by almost equating the claims, listing them together in the same sentence: “One of the book’s primary concerns is to open up the ways in which early writers about film – reviewers, critics, theorists – developed aesthetic and cultural categories to define and accommodate what was called ‘the seventh art’ or ‘the tenth muse’ and found discursive strategies adequate to the representation of the new art and technology of cinema.”¹⁹ Making sense of cinema involved identifying it as a means of expressing human subjectivities. Its association with both the arts and the muses served to place it in a realm within which it could be the subject of discourse about an aesthetic understanding of world. Whether cinema was “the seventh art” or “the tenth muse,” both monikers exhorted viewers to take it seriously, and to show that the bearings on how to appreciate it were already available.

¹⁸ Ricciotto Canudo, “The Birth of a Sixth Art” in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel, trans. Ben Gibson, Don Ranvaud, Sergio Sokota (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 59.

¹⁹ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

Calling cinema an art and calling it a muse are, however, significantly different statements. If “art” most readily suggests something that humans make – something upon which humans act, and through their activity, transform – “muse” means something that acts upon humans to compel them to creation. Following Canudo’s work, “art” conjures up visions of objects like paintings and sculptures, or bodies in a space, either performing or crafting that which will be offered to an audience. The artist’s mastery of art is front and center. Although film is moving toward the synthesis of art forms, Canudo foretells that “[a] man of genius, who by definition is a miracle just as beauty is an unexpected surprise, will perform this task of mediation which at present seems to us barely imaginable.”²⁰ Despite the complexity of the term, the utterance “art” emphasizes the creative act and its result. “Muse” has many of the same connotations, but adds a new one: its concern with what motivates and shapes the artist’s imagination and instinct. The muses are influencers of thought, and when considered within the history of ideas about inspiration (inevitable when the term “the tenth muse” evokes classical antiquity), that influence is external to the artist. The muse’s condition bears upon the thinkers that have summoned the deities to describe cinema, even if their proposals are not explicitly accounts of inspiration. They are, rather, arguments for how film can change how humans perceive and understand the world: Carpentier mentions his belief that film was one of modernity’s “modifiers of an entire sensibility;”²¹ Irzykowski, beginning his own study, asks: “is film a means of learning; and what, if anything, changes in our ontological and epistemological outlook as a result of the introduction of film and cinema?”²² Marcus herself cites Kenneth Macpherson’s 1928 intuition that “cinema has become so much a habit of thought and word and

²⁰ Canudo, “The Birth of a Sixth Art,” 58.

²¹ Carpentier, *El cine, décima musa*, 33.

²² Quoted in Elizabeth Nazarian, “*The Tenth Muse: Karol Irzykowski and Early Film Theory*” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2011), 113.

deed as to make it impossible to visualize modern consciousness without it.”²³ More than a set of works, film is also a giver of ideas that exists alongside other sources of inspiration. It is almost a state of mind that moving images induce in the viewer and that, simultaneously, remains outside the latter, like a bewitching landscape or a mesmerizing creature. Even if it is a human creation, it also has a life of its own.

The key difference between cinema-as-art and cinema-as-muse is the latter’s strong sense of the medium’s autonomy from the human and the accompanying depth and intensity of its compelling effects. The muse designation reflects a turn that Nicole Brenez terms “an anthropological adaptation to images” in which “the image and the real no longer come face to face, like two very distinct ontological states whose difference would make it possible to structure discernment, but which echo one another and are in a relationship of commensalism, parasitism, symbiosis and permanent exchange.” After the shift, “the image will, from now, turn out to be decidedly real, regardless of its nature or medium (psychic/material, patent/latent, actual/virtual, etc.),”²⁴ Brenez attributes the change from the secondary image to the “causal image,” in part, to photographic and reproduction technologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which enabled images to “multiply, become popular, free themselves of their technical origins and begin to roam the world at random.”²⁵ Cinema intensified the feeling of emancipation. It grew into a shadow world so enveloping that it felt undeniably alive and more able to stimulate human thought and action. In other words, it was in a stronger position to become a muse.

²³ In Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 1.

²⁴ Nicole Brenez. “Mimesis 2” in *Todas las cartas: Correspondencias Fílmicas* (exhibition catalogue), trans. Carmen Artal, Isabelle Dejean, Javier Bassas, Debbie Smirthwaite and Mark Waudby (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona e Intermedio, 2011), 284

²⁵ Brenez, “Mimesis 2,” 284.

It is necessary to note that when Brenez says that images are “decidedly real,” she does not speak of the credence in the physical manifestation of motion pictures in cinema’s mythical primal scene – the terror at the train’s approach in the Lumières’s *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895). The reality of the image here is more part of an ecological understanding of how the human interacts with the world and its components. Brenez borrows her terms – symbiosis, commensalism and parasitism – from biology, so that the makings of an ecosystem come into view. Yet they are also metaphorical approximations to the positioning of images after the shift in thought Brenez investigates. Determining that images are real (as opposed to “real”) requires a certain amount of magical thinking. It is telling that Brenez recalls the work of archaeologist Salomon Reinach, who in 1912 was wondering about the turn toward the causal image and its power to inspire: “Which historian, Reinach wonders, was the first to consider that an image wasn’t an illustrative and secondary artefact, in other words the consequence stemming from a text or the reflection of a referent, but an independent, active and causal element that could trigger myths and beliefs?”²⁶ Although Brenez eventually describes the turn in biological terms, she starts from Reinach’s arguments on the image’s influence on cosmogony. A form of magic takes place here, one that compels humans to recognize the image’s legitimate, independent existence. That magic is not the ability of a projection to suddenly acquire corporeality, but a *being-there* even as projection. The realization of the image’s incontrovertible presence made it possible for it to speak back to the human in ways outside of the latter’s control, to the extent that it began deeply transforming human psychic activity. If it had enough weight to produce myths, it was also able to perform muse-like functions, leading to the conception and execution of aesthetic acts.

²⁶ Ibid.

There is more to the connection between magic and inspiration in the face of cinema. Rachel Moore locates the importance of a vision of primitivism in early film theory (under discussion in the first chapter of this study), which found insight in thinking of a spectator's encounter with the new technology as a magical ritual that transforms through gesture and belief. She exposes that magical thinking, despite notions of enlightened progress, continues to course through modern culture thanks to technologies like the moving image. As a technology that traffics on "attraction, distraction, tactility, shock and repetition" to persuade and amaze, cinema undermines racist, colonialist distinctions between the primitive and the modern, to the point that it "begs us to consider the possibility that technology itself is magic."²⁷ The moving image is magical in that it produces an effect, and revives some human faculties that activate the visionary thinking behind artistic practices, like sensitivity to the meaning of movement. One could speak of a secular version of magic, where the rite of experiencing moving images has a multiplicity of effects shaped by viewers as they work through their experiences and find parts of their knowledge and memory expanded and rearranged. The expansion and rearrangement can be the start of the creative impulse.

The thinkers in the pages that follow channeled that impulse into writing. I argue that their work on cinema belies a magical, causal understanding of the image. In acknowledging its autonomy and gestural language, they grasped its power to instigate them to write striking compositions. Or that should be "powers," to be precise, for cinema does not have only one stimulating feature. The chapters below emphasize a different muse-like quality of cinema: its ghostliness, its eroticism, its foreignness, its monstrosity and its ineffability. Each one has a connection to the context in which the writers composed their cinema-inspired works, and makes inroads to studying the moving image through its encouragement of aesthetic endeavor. That is

²⁷ Rachel Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 11.

why cinema is not one muse, but many – it is able to house and transmit countless inventive energies. Just as it synthesizes the other arts, it can inspire them all as well. It is a place where familiar inspirations transform and evolve, and new ones reveal themselves. In the process of listening to those muses, the writers let cinema show many sides of itself in a light that produces non-instrumental, endlessly generative knowledge about it. These approaches to cinema through its muses are poetic investigations. The writings I will examine form a tradition of poetic investigation of cinema that has proven lasting and influential in Mexican cinematic thought.

1.2 POETIC INVESTIGATIONS

In order to define a tradition of poetic investigation, I must first specify what that entails from a discursive standpoint. I propose thinking of a significant history of Mexican film studies as a literary institution. That notion (as opposed to an academic institution) makes room for a continuity of works that perform inquiries on cinema in a poetic mode. It does not mean to supersede or replace the academy. In fact, the literary and academic institutions can and do overlap. More than territorial or disciplinary, the distinction serves to advocate for a history of Mexican film thought that extends beyond scholarly attempts to shape the professional field of cinema studies. That project, I contend, would greatly benefit from including and staying in dialogue with a film culture that produces knowledge about the medium through aesthetic methodologies. To begin, it is necessary to maintain that the idea of a literary discourse in film studies takes place in writing that clearly intends to induce pleasure *and* carry out research that has purchase in discussions over what counts as knowledge about cinema. I have based the parameters of a literary institution, the home of the poetic investigation, on four conditions.

The first refers to what is popularly known as literature – that is, the conventions of literary genres and the systems through which they move. Many of the works under discussion here belong squarely to identifiable literary forms. There are short stories (Horacio Quiroga’s “*El vampiro*” and Salvador Elizondo’s “*Anapoyesis*”), novellas (José Revueltas’s *El apando* and Elizondo’s *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante*) and novels (Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *La invención de Morel* and Jomí García Ascot’s *La muerte empieza en Polanco*). There are assorted poems by José Juan Tablada and Efraín Huerta. These texts traditionally encourage reading strategies known to a general audience through the defamiliarizing and foregrounding effects of their choices: they weave speculative fantasies, experiment with the semantic and typographic properties of written language, and immerse readers in fictional worlds that are new and recognizable or familiar and strange. An imaginative relationship to language takes the spotlight. Even if they challenge in their respective intricacies and enigmas, these texts are noticeably works of literature, published in independent magazines, newspapers, and volumes from commercial publishers rather than academic journals or presses. The literary institution in this first level is the culture of production of writing for the purposes of art and entertainment.

The second condition, an extension of the first, begins to ask what it means to say something is “literary” outside genre categories. Generic expectations do not explain what the literary is. Elements commonly assigned to literature (creativity, non-transparent language and narrative) can appear outside conventionally literary texts, so a comprehensive notion of a literary institution must cover more than the set of genres that is called literature. The difficulty of uncovering the precise limits of “literariness” has prompted leading theorists like Tzvetan Todorov to suggest, with some alarm, that it is possible that “literature does not exist.”²⁸ But one indication of the presence of the literary is the notion of pleasure. Poetic investigations in a

²⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Notion of Literature” in *New Literary History* 5, no. 1, (1973): 12.

literary institution of cinema studies must deliver aesthetic experiences – that is, intense, memorable phenomenal states that reorganize the readers’ knowledge and create a bodily awareness of reading. In the case of novels, novellas, short stories and poetry, it is assumed those effects await the reader, whether they actually come to pass or not. But other genres present in these pages benefit from the realization that they can also generate surprise and delight. I claim that focusing on aesthetic effects greatly illuminates the work of writers like Jorge Ayala Blanco, who writes in a difficult-to-categorize mode I call poetic criticism. Texts that press on the features that induce aesthetic encounters are one parameter from which to sketch a sense of the literary.

The third condition deals with another way to observe poetic qualities in written texts. There is a claim that texts about cinema can make on those literary properties: that they inevitably involve, and at times completely become, the exercise of ekphrasis. Understood here, at the most basic level, as the verbal representation of visual representation, ekphrasis happens in these pages when writers take it upon themselves to put into printed words (not in spoken words or audiovisual material) what they see in cinema. When, for instance, Cube Bonifant details the choreographed plasticity of director Emilio Fernández’s collaborations with cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, or Salvador Elizondo compares certain frames of Luis Buñuel’s films to Baroque emblems, the writers attempt evocation. They search for solutions to fulfill what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “the ekphrastic hope,”²⁹ or the desire to make readers see what they have seen on film. Because ekphrasis is about finding ways to bend language to reconstruct images, writers have considered it “a universal principle of poetics,”³⁰ and thus a core component of literariness.

²⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

There is a built-in inventiveness to the exercise of description that ties writing about film to one of the central characteristics of literary language.

Countering ekphrastic hope, Mitchell argues there is “ekphrastic fear”³¹ – the possibility that what appear to be distinct art forms will bleed into one another, with the potential submission of the visual under the verbal. The thought of words speaking for the silent visual arts threatens the ability of the latter to have genuine impact on audiences with their own surprising, characteristic becoming. Although understandable and ethical, I believe this fear has proven, by and large, unfounded, and the failure of its worst-case scenario to materialize further highlights the literary aspirations of writing that confronts moving images. In its early years, cinema did need writers to speak for it to ensure its longevity. Early film chroniclers, like Quiroga, Tablada, Bonifant, Enrique Chávarri and Amado Nervo indeed wrote on cinema’s behalf from the authority of their literary background and the grace of their talent, turning to their poetic acumen to exalt and delineate the fledgling medium. While it is tough to quantify how much chroniclers contributed to cinema’s survival, their project certainly took shape. In some ways, cinema even surpassed literature in becoming the storytelling medium of the twentieth century. But literature continued to develop, and the intersections and miscommunications between it and cinema have not stopped refreshing many fascinating questions about medium specificity. How to determine if an art form has taken over another? Is the mainstream moving image’s reliance on narrative a sign of an inescapable debt to literature? Theorists like Marks, Vivian Sobchack, and Jennifer Barker³² have articulated the centrality of touch in cinema’s expressive repertoire, giving the chance to ask whether film has ever fully

³¹ Ibid., 154.

³² See Marks’s *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (1999), Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), and Barker’s *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2004).

embraced its haptic capabilities to shuffle off literature's coil. Individual works of cinema and literature have nonetheless endured, and proven that there are enough exceptions in each to forever undermine rules that try to establish separations between media. Still, differences insist, and writers that overcome colonial fears have largely nurtured the growth of their craft. As I will discuss in section 4.1, José Revueltas argues that cinema can learn from literature to be more itself. When he wrote his novella *El apando*, he took his cue from cinema and composed the book explicitly in the terms of visual montage. The conversations between words and images in Mexican poetic investigations have, more often than not, demanded the enrichment of each.

The very lack of resolution to the colonial line of thought that worries about the dominance of an art form over others spurs a third axis for Mitchell: "ekphrastic indifference,"³³ which starts from the assumption that successful ekphrasis is ultimately impossible. And it is here that the creative impulse behind written works about cinema truly benefits not from indifference, but from the enthusiastic celebration of the limitations of words to match pictures. Letting flawed ekphrasis be an option, writers can write with the creativity that fearlessness in the face of failure affords. Genuine *poiesis* proliferates when the writer is liberated from the necessity to produce some ideal transference of the visual into the verbal. More importantly, one of the values of modern ekphrasis is precisely writing so that the image more clearly speaks for itself. In other words, it tries to make the cinematic image finally causal, showing the viewer's awareness of and respect for the image's autonomy and ability to look right back. Section 4.2, on the work of Jorge Ayala Blanco, inquires how his style performs this "writing into the difference"³⁴ between aesthetic activities (which are different forms of thought in action), where the task of pushing language does not aim at producing images, but to meet cinema in the

³³ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.

³⁴ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), e-book.

territory where both media attempt to access ideas outside their respective expressive means. Rather than giving in to worries of turning the image into an other that's absent within his words, Ayala Blanco makes cinema a presence beyond the words, as his writing seems like an attempt to exhaust the language available to describe film. "Failure" here is a euphemism for a creative relay, where one art form takes flight from the edge of another. Even if word and image do not match, what is left behind are works that communicate and reveal their own particular proportions in beautiful fashion. It is an understanding of poetic language as research, a marriage of knowledge production and rigor in literary inventiveness.

Sheer creativity accounts for the final condition to speak of the literary institution of Mexican film studies. The present study is not a critique of certain practices of the academic treatment of the arts, but it does share the conviction in those critiques that there must be a place in the academy for diverse forms of knowledge. One recent such critique comes from Terry Cochran, who laments the placing of literature within the academy as "a subcategory of cultural production" rather than "a process of invention that involves the human mind in its most basic yearnings and capacities to represent."³⁵ The poetic investigations into cinema that occur in a literary institution would reflect that stimulating condition. For Cochran, the literary matters because of "its powers to evoke the unknown, the unknowable, the unforeseen, or even the unthinkable."³⁶ Section 2.1 explores early film chroniclers' widespread observation of cinema's ghostliness for how it supplies an ideal vehicle for visionary thinking and, thus, for writing that can imagine the unexpected. Those writers explain that film projections look like specters from another world. That the moving image might lead toward unforeseen knowledge actually might make the term "muse" somewhat inadequate. Daniel Link points out that, when it comes to

³⁵ Terry Cochran, "The Knowing of Literature" in *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (Winter, 2007): 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

inspiration, the sirens are far more powerful figures than the muses. In Homer's telling, Link tells us, Odysseus averted the sirens' threat by simultaneously enjoying and rejecting their songs. The sirens introduce those who listen to them to something beautiful but mysterious and seemingly incomprehensible, not to techniques already well within human capacities (like the arts the muses inspire). Odysseus' desire to hear the sirens but not follow them reflects, for Link, an attitude toward imagination that severely undercuts the benefits of relinquishing control, of taking the risks that might reveal something truly, radically new. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his reading of Cochran, "literature is the storehouse and producer of unpredictable knowledge."³⁷ Culler's wording appropriately highlights the value of the accidental. Friedrich Hayek once spoke of the necessity for creating "a maximum of opportunity for accidents to happen"³⁸ so they lead to productive insights. Poetic experimentation is the artful exercise of chance in writing. It sends out configurations of language that interact with readers with often volatile, unanticipated results. Inside the poetic texts of Mexican cinema studies (some of them akin to siren songs), I argue we can find several propositions on how to turn to the moving image to train visionary learning.

The writings that follow fulfill these four conditions: they belong to the genres of literature, emphasize aesthetic pleasure, invent language to describe moving images and enact a process by which cinema expands knowledge into undiscovered territories. Their poetic feel comes with a certain impenetrability and mystery which, in the spirit of anti-colonial scholarship, any study must attempt to protect. But since I speak of one kind of institution firmly within another one, and across linguistic and cultural differences, I must engage in several acts of translation. Rather than avoiding the fact that something will be lost and in my analysis, I will

³⁷ Jonathan Culler, "Commentary: What is Literature Now?" in *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (Winter, 2007): 232.

³⁸ Quoted in Yuval Levin, "Imagining the Future" in *The New Atlantis* 4 (Winter, 2004): 50.

describe the problems of translation that lie ahead, and attempt to achieve the same productive mismatching that failed ekphrasis displays in its most successful instances.

1.3 A SPEAKABLE BETRAYAL: THREE AREAS OF *TRANSLATIO*

In his book *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, Geoffrey Harpham remembers having a troubling realization during a lecture in Turkey. His talk was about to start when he heard the call for the daily *salat* outside the hall. A sharp feeling of unfamiliarity came over him, which inevitably made him strongly aware of his own foreignness as a person and as an academic. Suddenly, the principles of humanistic study on which he based his work became merely arguments that not all scholars that might be categorized as humanists necessarily shared. For him, the humanities rest on the belief that “[t]he scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we better understand ourselves.”³⁹ But however comprehensive, that conceptualization has a history that differed from that of his audience. Perhaps what to an American scholar seems like humanistic research begins from different premises in another country. He needed to address that history before assuming that every humanist around the world starts from the same place.

Harpham’s story holds a lesson: if the humanities are a kind of foreign language, the inevitable risks of translation must be taken into account when trying to stage a conversation between multiple academic cultures. The translations occur in forms other than language, and if, as the Latin expression tells us, every translator is a traitor, I must acknowledge the many betrayals in which I have engaged in this project in the hope that a picture fuller than one words

³⁹ Geoffrey Harpham, *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.

can paint will become apparent to readers. Speaking of Latin: the present work is ideally an act not of translation, but of what Nataša Ďurovičová calls *translatio*, which extends “beyond semantics so as to include the social and political ground-rules of text transfer from one to another set of cultural circumstances...” and “is explicitly attentive to the non-identity, asymmetry, or unevenness of power relationships in which all translation is inevitably implicated.”⁴⁰ The performance of exchanges between the cultural work from the global south and that of the global north, as is the case here, cannot escape *translatio*, and so drawing attention to the imperfections in the dialogue is a vital step for Anglophone scholarly research of Mexican film thought.

On the subject of language, the central texts in my study were all originally written in Spanish, and with few noted exceptions, the translations are my own, as English translations are unavailable. I have strived for clarity while holding on to two of Walter Benjamin’s philosophies of translation. The first purports that “[t]rue translation is transparent: it does not obscure the original, does not stand in its light, but rather allows pure language, as if strengthened by its own medium, to shine even more fully on the original.”⁴¹ The second is his view that translation “ultimately has as its purpose the expression of the most intimate relationships among languages.”⁴² The first statement is germane with my own arguments in section 4.2 about Jorge Ayala Blanco’s rethinking of ekphrasis, and how the goal of his criticism is to illuminate cinema by describing it in non-mimetic ways. By being more like itself in the face of cinema, Ayala Blanco’s poetic criticism alerts audiences to a position where both what is poetic in writing and what is cinematic in film stand together in sharp relief. One does not block the light of the other,

⁴⁰ Nataša Ďurovičová, “Vector, Flow, Zone: Towards a History of Cinematic *Translatio*” in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York: Routledge, 2009), 95.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, trans. Steven Rendall (New York: Routledge, 2012), 81.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 77.

as it were. The second statement is a reminder to keep an eye on the dynamics that signal readers toward language difference instead of equivalence, and that negotiating that difference is what's most revealing about translations. Each excerpt here translated presented its particular challenge, but one recurring example is my attempt to preserve the tendency of these Spanish texts to accommodate long, variegated sentences. This is by no means exclusive of the Spanish language, but when transplanted into English, the words do sit more awkwardly on the page. This is true in the case of a writer like Ayala Blanco, but Tablada, Elizondo, and Revueltas in *El apando* also defy translators to match their penchant for abundance. I have tried to maintain those rhythms in English, as well as untranslatable localisms which are not so much translated as explained. There are cases where the writer does not test the elasticity of sentences. José Revueltas's *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas* is an academic text, and so I have translated accordingly. Every excerpt comes with a few notes on its particular translation issues.

Another level of *translatio* faces the discursive difference revealed in the previous section: the description of a literary institution for an academic one. Translating here has been, for the most part, a series of imitations, in which I borrow the history of academic film studies to construct a history of literary cinematic thought. I have chosen moments, texts and writers to sketch a genealogy not unlike those in European and North American film studies. The symmetry of imitation in this case is meant to underline its selectivity. My metacritical history is by no means exhaustive, and so the figures here highlighted are not meant to be only representative of a master narrative or definitive to the point of canonicity. Even though they appear as Latin American counterparts to the dominant voices, they are offered to share the attention of scholars in other traditions of film thought. I will introduce a few salient cases:

Section 2.1 recalls the moment in the heart of the Mexican Revolution when attendees at the Aguascalientes Convention (1914) watched a film of future President Venustiano Carranza and fired several shots at the spot where his image appeared on the screen. The moment, captured by novelist and early film chronicler Martín Luis Guzmán and later interpreted by cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, appears in the chapter as a primal scene for Mexican audiences, mimicking the way Tom Gunning treats the stories of Parisian horror at the Lumières's train actuality. It is not strictly necessary to find a reinterpreted primal scene for Mexican film history, but apart from being irresistible, the anecdote sharply and instructively contrasts attitudes toward the moving image in early audiences in Europe and Mexico. Gunning reads the (likely apocryphal) train tales to create a better picture of the urban modernity into which cinema burst, which in turn rethinks film spectatorship as a vacillation between doubt and belief.⁴³ I take the shooting of the screen Carranza to signal that Mexican audiences responded to the moving image with willing, voluptuous and active fantasizing. It is not that the shooters believed in Carranza's presence (which is Monsiváis's conclusion), but that they playfully enacted a violent vision spurred by the film. From this point, the anecdote underpins claims I make about how imagination has been at the forefront of cinematic reflections in Mexico.

Besides a primal scene, the present work frequently matches certain writers with familiar names from European and North American histories of film theory. The writers themselves invite these comparisons and even engage with film ontology's biggest luminaries. Chapter 4 looks at an essay on Bazin by Jomí García Ascot, and Revueltas explicitly aligns himself with Eisenstein while sometimes sounding a lot like Deleuze. In his anthology *Avances de Hollywood: Crítica cinematográfica en Latinoamérica, 1915-1945*, Jason Borge tentatively

⁴³ Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 6th edition, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 870.

proposed a similar matching by paralleling the writings of several thinkers from Latin America and Europe. He finds kinship between the theories of the cinematic close-up of Brazilian writer and 1920s Hollywood actor Olympio Guilherme and Béla Balázs,⁴⁴ and between the arguments for the artistry of cinema's mimetic limitations put forth by Mexican journalist Carlos Noriega Hope and Rudolf Arnheim.⁴⁵ The correspondences will appear unsurprising for several reasons. The writers in these chapters are middle-class, cosmopolitan and (with a key exception) male intellectuals, and the transcultural import of their writings is unmistakable. Also, it is likely that some of the same arguments about film could conceivably be made in different latitudes, even without contact between theorists and their works. It is pertinent to remember that, whether borrowed or coincidental, even the most complete theoretical matching between thinkers will be inevitably refracted through each writer's personal and cultural background (a phenomenon to which I will get in the foregoing chapters). Part of the background is a colonial past, which problematizes the ability of Mexican writers to write in a primary language that does not reference its antecedents. This makes their theoretical writings simultaneously less likely to rise to the conventional category of seminal work, and more in harmony with the migratory processes that generate and spread knowledge.

The pairings between members of a canon of film theory and members of the Mexican literary institution of cinema studies in my research are more a matter of creating a lineage rather than actually looking for specific, existing theories familiar to Anglophone scholars in Spanish-language texts. Again, themes of medium specificity, allure, montage and realism (among others) appear in Latin American film thought, but the focus of this study is on cinema's inspiring potential. The genealogy of writers that follows takes some light from the canonical interests to

⁴⁴ Jason Borge, *Avances de Hollywood: Crítica cinematográfica en Latinoamérica, 1915-1945* (Santa Fe, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2005), 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

shine it on others: the aforementioned phantasmatic, monstrous and otherworldly qualities of film. Canon formation is an academic discursive strategy, which I have imitated largely by adopting it with a different set of writers and locating different concerns. I have done so under the belief that canons can and must be reread, extended, and changed to prevent their study from fossilizing. That belief carries with it the hope that the recognition of a group of Mexican writers by the Anglophone field of media theory is precisely a way to interrogate canonicity.

There is also the matter of concepts and their centrality in Western humanistic research. Scholarly texts in those disciplines tend to work toward the coinage of terms, to be built around them, or both. I turn not only to North American and European thinkers to unpack the issues I raise, given the foundational status of their writings in Anglophone cultural and film criticism (I speak of names like Benjamin, Derrida, Deleuze and others), but I also propose a few concepts of my own. That is not to say that all of cinema and media studies follows the same methodologies. Academic writing is not monolithic, and efforts to promote its necessary evolution while preserving its rigor and hard-won legacies are always ongoing. One inspiration for my project, detailed in section 2.1, is the work of Robert B. Ray, who underscores the importance of interdisciplinary borrowing and imaginative research in film studies to ease the sway of normal science he identifies in the field. Ray incorporates viewing and writing practices based on surrealism and what Gregory Ulmer calls “heuretics” in cultural studies to expand the possibilities of film analysis, making each work of the moving image “a source of ideas about invention.”⁴⁶ Ray’s *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood* is the most fully realized expression of his project: by finding within each of four classic Hollywood films (*Grand Hotel*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *Meet me in St. Louis*) an item for each letter of the alphabet,

⁴⁶ Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 13.

and then, in Carlo Ginzburg's words, "squeezing"⁴⁷ those items as evidence, Ray creates pieces of varying length that reveal the "hidden things"⁴⁸ of which films are made. The writing doubles as a starting point for a myriad other research projects and a genre of writing in itself that remains uncommon (although decreasingly so) in academic cinema studies. Ray's work is a good analog for my discussion, with the key difference that Ray intends his findings to be a corrective to an established discipline, while in Mexico, where the engagement with cinema studies has not arguably been as sustained or widespread, the creative approach has been more a consequence than a choice to redirect the discipline. With film heuristics, Ray articulates a program of study in whose terms I can set my own sense of how poetic investigations in Mexican film studies operate, and make those operations intelligible to the Anglophone academy.

And yet, framing the theoretical and critical significance of a film heuristics or a literary film studies skirts closer to instrumentalization than poetic investigations do. Ray has to introduce his ideas to his discursive home, and in doing so, he violates some of their principles. Aware of the weight of historicity and the authority of research, he looks back upon Ulmer, but also Benjamin, Ginzburg, Wittgenstein, Pound, Barthes and Thoreau, to show the viability and longevity of his proposals. But Ray wears his sources lightly, tempering the pedagogical transparency scholarly writing demands with a freer associative attitude toward the material. He takes a step toward a more literary kind of writing, which allows a much larger and looser array of relationships with its influences. Rather than lock on a single, guiding concept or author, he runs through many of the names and sources of his approach to a film's particulars: first, he calls it "Benjamin's ruffles" (after the latter's statement that the ruffles on a dress evoke the past more

⁴⁷ Quoted in Ray, "Film Studies and the Problems of the New Century" in *New England Review* 27, no. 4 (2006): 115.

⁴⁸ Ray, *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xi.

powerfully than any document) and what Pound called “the method of the luminous detail.”⁴⁹ In each case, the intense focus on a single element of a film, no matter how small, grows outwards to larger insights. A refusal to keep the name of a concept consistent makes it harder for that idea to become paradigmatic, instead sending readers on a series of forking paths. Compare that to Ayala Blanco in section 4.2, whose concept-formation lets terms flow so rapidly, they slip through the reader’s fingers. Ayala Blanco rarely returns to central keywords, but instead allows them to burgeon between essays and even between paragraphs of those essays. Ray has been a model for the present work, for his project, in my view, balances the playfulness of poetic writing with lucidity and critical research. My work here is still an imitation of North American scholarship, but one that aptly represents my own concerns. It also wonders what could happen if the generic boundaries in writings on cinema were to blur. One result, Ray thinks, would be the increase in dialogues between the moving image’s various audiences – academics, cinephiles and casual viewers could all meet at the stage set by writing that is instructive and enjoyable. That is one powerful reason to carry out *translatio* between discourses.

Finally, a translation occurs from Mexican film studies to European and North American film studies. The problem in this case is falling into essentialist discourses of nationality. What I have done is underline certain tensions between cinematic cultures, whose insistence and intensity for the writings constellated here made them worthy of attention. The key tension, which permeates the others, is the one Jason Borge located at the dawn of Hollywood dominance: a deep ambivalence in Latin American writers toward cinema as a representative of US hegemony that they both rejected on anti-imperialist grounds and embraced on creative ones. He writes that

⁴⁹ Ray, “Film Studies and the Problems of the New Century,” 114-115.

Hollywood owed much of its early appeal among such writers to the emergence of a politically fraught technological imaginary, for which popular cinema served both as a model of formal expression and also a source of thematic exploration. If many Latin American intellectuals of the period saw Hollywood as a site of mechanical reproduction, artifice and vulgarity, popular film also furnished writers with a creative blueprint. As ambivalent as they are eccentric, Quiroga's seminal Hollywood stories, Monteiro Lobato's... *The Clash of the Races* and... Clemente Palma's... *XYZ* articulate of [sic] revenge fantasies on the very film industry by which they were inspired. These groundbreaking works contested the perceived technical wizardry of the nascent film industry by foregrounding fiction's own creative ingenuity, thus using the familiar weapon of literature to stage Latin American mastery of Yankee technological acumen and the alluring dangers of modern mass culture.⁵⁰

Borge's argument cogently justifies the motivations for taking the creative approach to investigating film in Latin America's early chroniclers. Mexico was a special case given its "physical and symbolic proximity to Hollywood."⁵¹ Cube Bonifant (from subsection 2.2.4), for one, eloquently harnessed her ambivalence to increase Mexican film's national conscience through the emergence of the domestic industry, simultaneously becoming the most vocal champion of national self-criticism as a vital tool in regarding foreign cinema with a healthy skepticism. In order to maintain an acute critical eye, Bonifant honed her sardonic wit, which also ensured her readers would be entertained as well as informed about the travails of world cinema while the medium, and the culture around it, solidified in the global consciousness.

Expanding on Borge's work, I argue that the ambivalence toward cinema and its literature-inspiring role continued past the rise of Hollywood, even as its focus has been somewhat displaced. During the 1960s, at the twilight of the Golden Age of Mexican film production, that ambivalence turned inward, as Mexican-based writers like Elizondo and García Ascot (sections 3.1 and 3.2) rebelled against the creative and political bankruptcy of popular Mexican films. Wishing to repair that state of affairs, *Nuevo Cine*, the organization Elizondo and

⁵⁰ Jason Borge, *Latin American Writers and the Rise of Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

García Ascot helped found, wrote in their manifesto the goal of producing films that were more socially engaged and aesthetically adventurous in order to forge a competitive, worthy national cinema. That was part of the larger objective of creating a cinematic community that exchanged ideas through images and writing. They saw the activities of filmmaking and criticism as part of the same cultural activity, and set in their eponymous journal the works that would serve as foundations for a Mexican cinephilia. Their project did not see the result they expected, instead leaving behind writings that were lyrical and passionate in their expressions of distance and longing from the tools to make cinema, and two short films that developed a cult following, but not expansive influence. A disciple of the *Nuevo Cine* group, Ayala Blanco latches onto the hopeful dismay at Mexican cinema and the current advent of globalized film production, where the attainment of a Mexican industrial presence that would steadily produce significant works remains elusive. In his alphabetical and historical surveys of Mexican cinema, Ayala Blanco comes to terms with the desire for a robust cinematic literacy to inform accomplished filmmaking, and the feeling that, in most cases, Mexican filmmakers either sabotage or altogether ignore that enterprise. His coming-to-terms happens through the application of a resolutely poetic approach to film history and criticism that seeks to create a strong, evocative collective memory about Mexican cinema from which filmmakers and audiences can draw. Mexican cinema has a checkered but rich past and present, Ayala Blanco says, and he reconstructs it with literary beauty to prevent future generations from feeling creatively orphaned. Ayala Blanco gives continuity to the reactions to an art form that Mexican writers never entirely felt as their own. Readers looking for the findings of Mexican poetic film research must keep in mind that ambivalence, yearning and disappointment fuel those reflections as much

as love and curiosity. An effective *translatio* between North American academic cinema studies and Mexican literary film thought needs to bring these contradictory feelings to the surface.

I must restate that my goal is to stay out of the way of the Mexican tradition of literary cinema studies as it speaks about itself in its own terms. For now, the reader should be aware that my work here is a step in the process of reaching the equality of Mexican film writers with their North American and European counterparts. By translating the work of those writers on a variety of levels, I've temporarily eclipsed the particularity of their voice so they can enter a different discourse and participate in it for a mutually beneficial dialogue about how to make sense of the cinematic phenomenon. A poetic response, one that answers in kind to the literary institution of Mexican film studies, would have been the more coherent approach. I take comfort in Benjamin's perception that translation is an art form in itself. On that basis, my discussion is indeed responding to a creative practice with another.

1.4 THE MUSES OF MEXICAN FILM WRITING

Even though I have arranged the writers below in a canon that emulates histories of film theory in North American cinema studies, the writers themselves are familiar names in Mexican letters. I have connected them through their literary vocation and the poetic component of their writings about cinema. These touchstones in the history of Mexican film criticism form a linear chronology, which starts in the earliest years of the medium and continues through the late sixties to today. My history of poetic investigations is divided in three chapters, each comprising of two sections. Chapter 2.0, "Between the Birth of Cinema and the Golden Age," covers the period from early years of cinema in Mexico (1896) to the latter part of the *Edad de Oro* (the late

forties), where cinema made its way into the public consciousness and a significant body of writing about it made it a fixture of daily and weekly publications. Chapter 3.0, “*Nuevo Cine* from Criticism to Filmmaking to Literature,” looks at the community of cinephiles that made the first concerted, explicit and long-term effort to establish a Mexican film culture: the foundation of *Nuevo Cine*, both an organization and a journal. Chapter 4.0, “Founding Professors,” concerns itself with the birth of the first Mexican film school, the *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos*, or CUEC, in the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) and the work of two of its first professors, one in the latter part of an illustrious literary career, the other starting his own, with film history as his subject.

Section 2.1, “The Requisite and Guarantee of Eternal Contemplation: the Ghost as Muse in Early Latin American Film Criticism,” takes its title from Adolfo Bioy Casares’s novel *The Invention of Morel* (1940) which, alongside its predecessor “*El vampiro*” (1927) by Horacio Quiroga, serve as foundational myths for Latin American film culture. The reason is their portrayal of cinema-inspired technologies that produce phantom women with whom the protagonists fall in love. In telling stories of obsession with a projected image – one of them in the first decades of the technology’s popularity – these writers place the ghost next to Plato’s cave and psychoanalysis’ mirror as a working metaphor for cinema that, I argue, holds sway in Latin American film thought. These stories of romantic longing for the phantom image tie the ghost explicitly to the composition of words of love – that is, to poetic creativity. From that point, I turn to Daniel Link’s studies of imagination in the twentieth century to theorize how ghosts spur creative thinking and action. Link’s idea of the liminal, uninterpellated status of ghosts makes them “thresholds,” eternal emissaries of the presence of the new and the unexplored. Linking the ghost with cinema, Eyal Peretz’s work on Brian De Palma’s filmmaking

explains how thinking of the moving image as a ghost shows an awareness of cinema's visionary opening to an enigmatic dimension of the senses – that part inaccessible to perception where what is genuinely unknown lies. The phantom thus keeps viewers alert to the openness of their bodies to time (to what they cannot know) and so to the futurity of the world, creating a strong feeling that there is space for something to be invented, for true creation to take place. Peretz focuses on De Palma because he finds his films singularly conscious of the phantom-like other of the visible image, but he argues all film images share a connection to what is beyond them. Knowingly or not, Latin American writers that summoned the cinematic image as they would a ghost laid bare its potential to rally its viewers' imaginative forces.

The endurance of the imaginative in the early impressions of film and the development of film writing from the chronicle to modern criticism are the subjects of Section 2.2, "The Film Chronicler as Medium: Toward a Metahistory of Early Film Criticism," which closes Chapter 2.0. I propose that the playful, personal and experimental aspects of the nineteenth century chronicle never truly disappeared from what became journalistic film criticism, and that the realist attitude of early film also encouraged fantasy as a response. Authors like Enrique Chávarri, Amado Nervo and José Juan Tablada accompanied their poetic, literary output with chronicles in which they assayed their wonderment at new moving image and sound technologies in magical terms, at times declaring film to be the defeat of death. They also found inspiration in the *costumbrista* writing of José Tomás de Cuéllar, who intended his novel *La linterna mágica* (1880) to shed dispassionate, clear-eyed light on daily life, but also showed a powerful romantic side in its attempt at articulating (and therefore, inventing) a Mexican identity and becoming a moral voice in an increasingly secular society. Film chroniclers observed their society as much as they embellished and sought to transform it, both of which were poetic

endeavors. The chronicle as an art form found its foremost exponent in Cube Bonifant, who straddles the silent era and the *Edad de Oro*. Once an actress with movie-star charisma, Bonifant fed the cult of her witty, edgy, modern personality through her cinematic chronicles, all while sketching some of the formal considerations that would become crucial elements of film criticism. It was as if the feminine, ghostly moving image was finally speaking back to its viewers in its own voice, as Bonifant, the flapper who imbued her chronicles with the appeal of her star persona, made the case for seeing in the moving image not only an object of admiration and desire, but also the kind of causal event that generates discovery, reflection, and creation. From the twenties to the forties, Bonifant drew attention to the notion that the moving image thinks and can inspire through more than allure.

The two sections in Chapter 3.0 each inquire into the work of two authors before, during and after their involvement with *Nuevo Cine*, the cinephile group and journal who, in their manifesto, demanded a consolidation of a Mexican film culture in all spheres: production, distribution, and reception. The first major such enterprise in Mexican cinema outside industrial circles, their goal was to build a community that would move freely between the three activities (if they so wished), so that filmmaking, film viewing and film writing were all part of the same creative-critical process. They were also a point of encounter for many exiles of the Spanish Civil War who had come of age in Mexico and who largely shaped cultural activity in their adopted country. Although there were many in their ranks, I have chosen these two writers because they were founding members of the journal, wrote consistently throughout their brief run, represented a cosmopolitan intellectual class still on the rise in the early sixties, and were the only members to have gone on to make films under the auspices of *Nuevo Cine*. Section 3.1, “A Surreal Love: Salvador Elizondo’s Erotic Muses” is about the eponymous author, the son of

Mexican film producer and diplomat Salvador Elizondo Pani who, after an education at the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* in Paris, returned to Mexico to express in his criticism for *Nuevo Cine* a coherent Surrealism that found cinema's creative vitality in an inherent eroticism. Elizondo took a surrealist eye to Eisenstein's theories of montage to construct his own generative juxtaposition of disparate elements, which would appear in his criticism and his film *Apocalypse 1900* (1965) – a series of found still images, both photographic and hand-drawn, that told the story of an apocryphal end of times at the chaotic birth of the twentieth century. But while a career in film production was not to be, Elizondo took his principles of erotic montage into his fiction. His novel *Farabeuf, o la crónica de un instante* (the subtitle translates as “the chronicle of an instant,” announcing its distension and manipulation of time) and the literary, Mallarmé-inspired pieces of *Camera lucida* among other texts. Elizondo is the clearest example of the trajectory of poetic investigations of cinema: for him, cinema came before literature. He had a career as a critic before becoming a leading figure in the sixties' literary vanguard with fictions and essays irrevocably affected by his contact with cinema. In stories like “*Anapoyetrón*,” a short fiction/criticism hybrid, Elizondo recounts an encounter with poetic literary creation in cinematic terms: in a tale reminiscent of the film-mad scientists of Quiroga and Bioy Casares, a man shows his friend how a device of his making mediates the vision of a poem to release enough energy to bring the poem's author back to life.

If Elizondo's criticism makes its erotic charge apparent in voluptuous prose, his colleague Jomí García Ascot's is a more classically measured and expository work. A Spaniard whose family arrived in Mexico fleeing Franco's Spain, García Ascot writes about cinema with the clear goal of establishing a critical vocabulary. He is a good counterpoint to Elizondo's more unpredictable approach. Yet his placement in Chapter 3.2, “The Inspiration of Displacement and

Nostalgia,” has to do with how he latches onto an outward look at world cinema (and world film theory) that’s deeply indebted to an exile’s longing for his lost home. García Ascot found in cinema an excellent vehicle to creatively experience and express foreignness, a means to inhabit a space and time to which he did not belong. He was the journal’s reporter on what was happening in film thought outside of Mexico, engaging with Bazin’s writings, among others. His feelings of displacement appear nakedly in *En el balcón vacío*, his 1962 short written and produced by his *Nuevo Cine* colleagues. The story of a woman who, transplanted to Mexico City during childhood, remembers her witnessing of the arrest of a Republican soldier, *En el balcón vacío* deploys film’s ability to create sound-image asynchronies to capture a life on different spatial and temporal planes. Ending his cinematic career with a single film, García Ascot would continue, like Elizondo, on a novelistic path. *La muerte empieza en Polanco*, a thriller filled with Hitchcockian references about a film critic’s involvement in a crime, would be his final work. The self-referential aspects chart the author’s eternal quest for identity in a film-infused literary project. That these *Nuevo Cine* writers, after the disbanding of their short-lived circle, returned to literature while keeping cinema at the center of several of their fictions, meant they found ways to pursue their manifesto’s points: they kept making films in writing. They might not have reached all their targets, having published only seven volumes of their journal between 1961 and 1962, but they did set off a few developments that would ensure discourse on film would carry on and even grow in Mexico.

Chapter 4.0 covers the aftermath of *Nuevo Cine*, which saw the birth of the first Mexican film school within UNAM. The two final chapters concern themselves with CUEC professors: one a founding faculty member, the other its longest-serving scholar. Besides teaching courses on film history and theory, they wrote literary texts about or inspired by film. In Chapter 4.1,

“Monstrous Muses, or The Strange Case of José Revueltas,” the focus is on Revueltas’s book *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas* (1965), a text book of film theory where the author, an already established, if controversial, novelist that had scripted a few Golden Age classics (including Buñuel’s *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* [1954]) collected the thoughts that would inform his pedagogy. The book, however, promotes visionary writing on film and presents a rationale to investigate it poetically. Revueltas’s theories of montage attribute their origin to Eisenstein’s own, but find their thrust in baroque philosophy, particularly Baltasar Gracián’s notion that learning happens through wonder. If cinema is a monstrosity in what Revueltas sees as its synthetic nature, it awes viewers and opens them to transformation. Revueltas would take the wonderful monstrosity of cinema’s montage into his writings, like *El apando*, to produce the same didactic effect. In championing wonder as a pedagogical asset, Revueltas set the basis for a program of research and criticism that pursued that same awe-inspiring effect. He also attempted the *translatio* of Mexican film theory to form part of a universal discipline, articulating his theories through the history of Mexican art to show how its arguments lead to a fundamental understanding of the image where all cultures’ attempts at film theory eventually converge. His belief in a unified cinematic theory puts the accent on how writers compose it, which for him is a process with historical specificity, but also appeals to a common humanity. Revueltas’s cinematic reflections proved hugely influential in his political thought. The language of some of his speeches replicates the principles of juxtaposition of ideas and universality brought up in *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, which was the last book he wrote before rising to the intellectual leadership of the student movement of 1968.

1968 was also the year of publication of Jorge Ayala Blanco’s *La aventura del cine mexicano*, a landmark “first mapping” of Mexican cinema history that established its author as

the most prolific and referenced film critic in Mexico, a reputation that has lasted to this day. His work binds literary, academic and journalistic institutions, since it appears in journals, weekly outlets and books. Chapter 4.2, “Beyond the Muse: Jorge Ayala Blanco and Co-Composing with Cinema,” explains how he practices a form of ekphrasis that does not colonize the image and instead strives for letting it preserve its multiple aesthetic associations for the viewer. The goal of his ekphrasis is not complete transference of images into verbal form, but meeting cinema on the phantom-like dimension where both activities become visionary and access the unknown and unknowable. In order to do so, he provides aesthetic experiences with his prose, which is best described as “poetic criticism:” a form of writing that carries its analysis through lexicographic and structural games that have coalesced in a unique, consistent authorial voice. Ayala Blanco calibrates his criticism to emphasize the phenomenal aspects of reading through the foregrounding of his choices. I argue that, counterintuitively, Ayala Blanco tries to further inhabit poetry rather than approach, mimic and reflect cinema with his words, thus participating in a singular relationship with his inspiration. He is not writing love poems to his muse, as it were, or if he is, his pieces express a particular kind of love. If his writing can be called “cinophile” insofar as he loves film, and love, in the Western tradition, is the origin of poetic language, his love for cinema differs from that of his predecessors. Instead of Tablada’s courtly devotion and, later, Efraín Huerta’s heteronormative and ambivalent sexualization of his muses, Ayala Blanco offers liberation in his respect for cinema’s autonomy. By responding to cinema through the intensification of his poetic verbosity, Ayala Blanco allows cinema to speak for itself rather than overtake it with language. In a way, his criticism “fails” in matching cinema, leaving open and embracing the possibility of asymmetrical communication with it and so of cinema keeping something to itself. It is the protection of that interiority what makes Ayala Blanco’s

communion with cinema one of romantic intimacy. His writing shows that the relationship between a writer and her inspiration is mutually liberating. The writer does not fall into uncritical, fetishistic obsession with cinema's charms, and cinema does not risk being trapped in the amber of exhaustive, demystifying analysis. Both feel tantalizingly alive.

The coda grapples with two questions left by my singular focus on writers of film-related texts: do poetic investigations have a place in other screen media, like television? And who are the audiences for poetic investigations? Something that has motivated this research from the start is the belief that poetic investigations make the study of cinema available to new readers by actively aspiring to become pleasure reading. Scholarship on cinephilia has advocated for the role of pleasure in film research. Undeniably, it can be a problematic veil, and it can also lead to clarity and lucidity. One of my contentions is that Mexican film thought has tended to take the poetic route to insight. That route has always been open and can greatly contribute to academic rigor. It would be a mistake to deride the latter, but a constant reminder of the perils of some of its claims, like the pretensions to total mastery and knowledge, is never out of place. Claiming that any work of research has ever colonized a film or group of films so completely so as to destroy all possibilities of seeing them afresh would be problematic. That does not impede researchers from choosing to encourage multiple engagements with moving image works and to make the latter's life-like unpredictability – their mysteries, their compelling strangeness – the core of their investigations. These writers have and, in so doing, they seek to connect with readers not only through the pleasure of watching films, but also the pleasure of writing and reading about them. The writings extend the impact of the viewing experience and have an impact of their own. More crucially, they highlight the awareness that a work of the moving image can let its audience's thoughts take root and grow in their own, unexpected directions. I

believe that is a solid foundation for academics trying to create an identity for a Mexican cinema studies. By being in touch with its legacy of poetic investigations, they could construct a welcoming discipline.

2.0 BETWEEN THE BIRTH OF CINEMA AND THE GOLDEN AGE

2.1 THE REQUISITE AND GUARANTEE OF ETERNAL CONTEMPLATION: THE GHOST AS MUSE IN EARLY LATIN AMERICAN FILM CRITICISM (1896-1948)

2.1.1 Introduction: the Lessons of Spectral Romances

In his book *In Broad Daylight: Movies and Spectators after the Cinema*, Gabrielle Pedullà begins his account of the aesthetic function of the movie theater not with one story, but with two – specifically, Plato’s cave and psychoanalysis’s mirror.¹ For Pedullà, these two proved to be the most popular and enduring analogies of several offered when questions of what it was like to watch movies arose in different time periods: the cave made its way into cinematic thought in the journals of the 1910s and ‘20s (and summoned back by Derrida as late as 2001),² while Pedullà credits Jean-Louis Baudry (French critic and, significantly, also a novelist) with introducing the similarities between dreaming and film viewing in the early 1970s (only to be taken up later and most notably by Roland Barthes and Christian Metz).³ Pedullà marvels at both the fact that these two metaphors remain relevant today, and that early theories of cinematic spectatorship tended toward analogy rather than more direct observation of the conditions a theater provided. He speculates about the reasons why the question was displaced through metaphor, wondering if, in the case of Plato’s cave, the project had to do with how irresistible the intuitiveness of the

¹ Gabrielle Pedullà, *In Broad Daylight. Movies and Spectators After the Cinema* (Verso: London, 2012), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

analogy might have been for the first theorists, and with how the mirror analogy was “less ‘cultured’” and thus accessible without knowledge of Plato or even Freud⁴ (not to mention the way it spoke of cinema as fulfilling a psychic need and, thus, explained its appeal at a seemingly more profound level). The cave had the further, and equally tempting, prestige factor, for writers who put it forth had, according to Pedullà, “good reason to hope that the classical allusion would offer the newcomer [cinema] the quarterings of nobility required for admission into the empyrean of the respectable arts,”⁵ which would also explain why the deployment of the cave seemed unaware of how it could give potential objectors of the cinema weapons with which to attack it, such as the analogy’s confirmation that cinema deceives its viewers. Whatever the case, be it legitimacy, symmetry or simple elegance, the cave and the mirror emerged as foundational myths from which many currents of film thought, particularly in Europe, could feed.

Replicating a model of discourse-delineation to which writers like Pedullà have turned (with the purpose, it must be said, of highlighting the limitations of such process, regardless of how expedient it can be) seems like a pertinent start, in order to destabilize the notion that the cave and the mirror have been almost “unanimously” invoked. I will do so to find another analogy for cinema of equal power and reach, but generated and propagated outside, or in the margins of, the canon of Western culture that bequeathed the cave and the mirror onto film theorists – that is, a story that could be imagined as a governing metaphor of film thought in a different geopolitical context. And since my work here argues for the centrality of creative inquiry in Latin American film culture, I will take an artistic investigation into cinema as my starting point. Thus I believe it appropriate to begin with a fiction – or, like Pedullà, with two, both revolving around a central metaphor. Joining the cave and the mirror, then, there’s the

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

ghost, which, I claim, is the metaphor for cinema that animates the theory and criticism of the writers included here, which cover a period roughly between 1896 (the date of the arrival of the Lumière cinematograph to Mexico) to 1948 (the year chronicler Cube Bonifant retired from journalism) and represent primarily Mexico, with several instances from Argentina, Uruguay, and Cuba. I've tasked these works with telling a history of film thought outside institutional disciplinary definitions, for it takes place before the founding of the first film school in Mexico (in the mid-1960s), and argues for the existence of a tradition of non-academic film studies that heavily shaped cinematic education in that country, both inside and outside the university. This section concerns reflections on film from the first sightings of the invention at the turn of the twentieth century up to the debates about the emergence of the sound film in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the proliferation of discussions about the possibility and existence of a national film culture in the 1940s.

Specifically, I'm interested in two ghost tales, one a classic, the other its clearest influence: Horacio Quiroga's "*El vampiro*," a short story first published in the Buenos Aires daily *La Nación* in 1927, and Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *La invención de Morel* (*The Invention of Morel*), from 1940. Within their respective genres, both works concern a man (the protagonist and narrator), who meets an inventor that has built a contraption to record the lives of people, and then project them for the observation of others. In both works, characters fall passionately, madly in love with the projected image of a woman, to the extent that they would die to be with them and, importantly, the projections do not require a screen, reminding the reader more of holograms than cinematic images, even when the latter are their unmistakable inspiration. The similarities do not end there, of course, but those are the ones I would like to emphasize here.

Quiroga's "*El vampiro*" is of a piece with the author's pioneering film criticism, published in the magazines *El Hogar* (from 1918 to 1919, and then again from 1927 to 1931), *Caras y Caretas* (1919-1920), *Atlántida* (where he writes a weekly column on film beginning in 1922) and *La Nación*, where "El vampiro" first appeared in print. Set in the years before the coming of sound cinema, the story immediately establishes the filmic origins of the device at its center, when Rosales, the man responsible for building the machine, describes it for Grant, his friend (whom he met at a movie theater), only confidant during the project's development and the first person, besides Rosales himself, to see the results of the apparatus (though not the apparatus itself). Grant is also the story's narrator. The following exchange ensues between the two men right after the two have an impossible dinner with a third guest, who "was not a woman, but a ghost; the smiling, translucent specter of a woman in a low-cut dress:"⁶

Precisely, it was "her." The enormous amount of life her expression gave away had revealed the possibilities to me. A stilled motion picture is the impression of an instant in life – everyone knows that. But as soon as light, voltage and the N¹ rays animate the film, all of her transforms into a vibrant trace of life, more alive than the ever-fugitive reality and the most vivid memories that guide our earthly life toward death itself. But only you and I know this.⁷

The ghostly woman at Rosales's table – the product of a concentrated channeling of the N¹ rays, described in the story as invisible waves irradiating from objects and people that compel the eye and the ear to follow them; a radiation beyond light and sound that doesn't just make something visible, but impossible for the senses to ignore – happens to be the incorporeal double of a famous Hollywood actress that remains unnamed throughout the story. Her fame sparks a recognition in both our central characters that's powerful enough to make introductions unnecessary. The phantom lady wanders through Rosales's house, engages both men in

⁶ Horacio Quiroga, "El vampiro" in *Cuentos Completos II*, ed. Leonardo Garet (Montevideo, Uruguay: Cruz del Sur/Banda Oriental, 2002), 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

conversation, and languidly retires to sleep when exhausted, all the while bathing her surroundings in the jittery glow of an embodied silent film. The exhaustion, however, happens to be a consequence of the process that brought the ghost into existence. Grant and Rosales discuss how she seems to be permanently fading, not like an image that grows more difficult to see, but rather like a patient afflicted with a slow-moving illness. Hoping to end the suffering of his creation, brought about by her half-alive in-betweenness, Rosales makes a radical choice: to murder the real actress in order to give her projection the independent life it deserves. In a heart-stopping moment, time and space contract and Grant watches the ghost walk as if to rejoin her actual body at the very instant that Rosales, having travelled to California, stabs the flesh-and-blood actress to death. The vision shocks Grant into unconsciousness.

Grant awakes, several days later, to find out the murder did not have the intended effect of freeing the projection from its source. A new visit to the recently returned Rosales reveals the specter in his home turned not into a real woman, but into a motionless skeleton – the very face of death. Rosales assesses the outcome and concludes his generation of the ghost was missing genuine love: “Love is not necessary in life, but it’s indispensable for knocking on death’s door. If I had killed for love, my creature would be throbbing with life today in that couch.”⁸ Not that the setback stops Rosales from trying again: days later, he managed to

project our friend’s [the actress’s] films on a screen that’s highly sensitive to N¹ rays. Through a rather vulgar device, I kept in motion the liveliest photographic moments of the lady awaiting us... You know well that while we speak, all of us achieve instants of such conviction and perfectly timed inspiration that we look into the eyes of others and see ourselves, or something of ourselves that projects itself forward... So she unfastened herself from the screen, at first fluctuating a few millimeters from it, and at last she came to me...⁹

⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁹ Ibid., 105.

As Grant notices the absence of the skeleton, Rosales explains that it disappeared as soon as the specter returned in the wake of intensified exposure to her photogenic radiation. But the former feels something's wrong with this new phantom – a burning desire for her host, one that Grant does not believe his friend can resist and that, in his view, should spur Rosales to undo his creation. “She’s a vampire,” he desperately warns Rosales, “and she has nothing to offer you! Do you understand?”¹⁰ Of course, Rosales ignores Grant’s pleas – the next morning, Rosales’s dead body is found in his living room, surrounded by the charred remains of films. The servants believe the accidental fire of the highly flammable celluloid caused the heart attack, but Grant thinks he knows better. “I knew,” he confesses, that “there was not a single drop of blood left in the deepest recesses of his veins.”¹¹

While Quiroga’s ending, which keeps Rosales’s fate an eternal secret, remains ambiguous, it does convey a level of obsession with this super-cinematic ghost that borders in a clear desire for self-destruction. Whether the vampiric image (which becomes more and more seductive and insistent in her demands for her creator’s company) gorged herself in Rosales’s blood or the fire provoked his heart failure, it transpires that Rosales’s death came about from his wish of spending more time with his favorite actress, be it in the form of the specter he successfully wrenched from the screen, or in her projected image in the films that caught fire and burned his viewing room with him in it. By contrast, Bioy Casares reworks this love-fueled death-drive in *La invención de Morel* to make the motivation and form of the protagonist’s demise explicit: he records himself in Morel’s machine – a fatal procedure – to join his beloved Faustine in a technological, spectral afterlife.

¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹¹ Ibid., 106.

The novel traces the development of this love in its tale of a man who washes up on an island (and the setting, along with the scientist's name, should clue the reader into its connection with Wells's Dr. Moreau) while evading capture. The Fugitive soon finds that he is not alone – his island hideout hosts a group of what seem like tourists. But as the Fugitive attempts to remain unseen, the tourists' peculiar behavior begins to arouse his suspicions, especially when he decides to show himself to a woman that has captivated him as he spied her in her daily contemplation of the sunset. He calls her Faustine in his ignorance of her actual name, but his calls go answered. Unlike Quiroga's actress, Faustine does not acknowledge the Fugitive's presence at all. Soon, he discovers that she is one of many wandering life-like recordings of the island's inhabitants, special reanimations made with a tide- and wind-powered machine that, in the process of capturing people's semblance and movements, poisons them with a kind of radiation. In other words, death is the price of this mechanical immortality. It is late in the story that Morel explains the eponymous device, in terms strikingly reminiscent of Rosales's exposition of the N¹ rays:

“With my machine a person or an animal or a thing is like the station that broadcasts the concert you hear on the radio. If you turn the dial for the olfactory waves, you will smell the jasmine perfume on Madeleine's throat, without seeing her. By turning the dial of the tactile waves, you will be able to stroke her soft, invisible hair and learn, like the blind, to know things by your hands. But if you turn all the dials at once, Madeleine will be reproduced completely, and she will appear exactly as she is; you must not forget that I am speaking of images extracted from mirrors, with the sounds, tactile sensations, flavors, odors, temperatures, all synchronized perfectly. An observer will not realize that they are images.”¹²

Morel summarizes his invention as consisting of three parts: the first forces bodies to broadcast the signals of their perceivable parts; the second detects and records these signals, and the last one sends them back into the world. Morel compares the three steps to a television monitor, “a

¹² Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003), 69-70.

camera that takes the television's images," and a film projector, although he proudly points out that his moving pictures do not require a screen or even darkness – a moving image technology that combines those available at the time of writing, and transcends them. And speaking of analogies, Bioy Casares chooses to deploy radio and television as examples of technologies that emit and receive invisible waves to illustrate the existence of recordable sensual stimuli, rather than give the latter a name, as Quiroga does with his N¹ rays. But through these simplifications for the laymen, the Fugitive learns, during his furtive surveillance, how to operate the machine. He also comes to realize that Faustine's ghost, whom he believed had once been Morel's beloved, might in fact not have been romantically involved with the scientist – a condition that opens the way for the Fugitive to recognize the only fate he will allow himself:

My life is not so atrocious. If I abandon my uneasy hopes of going to find Faustine, I can grow accustomed to the idea of spending my life in seraphic contemplation of her.

That way is open to me: to live, to be the happiest of mortals.

But my happiness, like everything human, is insecure. My contemplation of Faustine could be interrupted, although I cannot tolerate the thought of it:

If the machines should break (I do not know how to repair them);

If some doubt should ruin my paradise (certain conversations between Morel and Faustine, some of their glances, could cause persons of less fortitude than I to lose heart);

If I should die.

The real advantage of my situation is that now death becomes the condition and the pawn for my eternal contemplation of Faustine.¹³

¹³ Ibid., 100.

That is, he chooses to bathe himself in the magical and noxious energies of Morel's invention to reach Faustine in death (as, presumably, Rosales and his actress find themselves at the end of "*El vampiro*") and create a motion picture of their coupling, even if their union will be merely an image (a montage, in fact), the picture of two separate entities brought together not by their mutual awareness of each other, but only by their proximity in the eyes of whomever gazes upon them. He finishes his journals sending a plea to a brilliant mind to come along, build a device capable of "assembl[ing] disjointed presences" based on his report of his experience with Morel's machine, and find Faustine and him so he can "enter into the heaven of her consciousness."¹⁴ Bioy Casares makes the Fugitive's desire to finally achieve the beloved's acknowledgment a dream, and so the latter's ultimate achievement remains unrequited love. The novel ends with a note about a future technology for which the character can only hope.

In figures of ghosts that emerge as projections that are relatively autonomous from their technological origin, address us unpredictably, and exceed the frame and screen that we often consider a basic condition of cinema, we find an apparition that pushes the characters toward a romantic act of self-overcoming. The protagonists of these stories are inspired by the hope of glimpsing, or allowing others to glimpse, into a dimension apart from the technical rationalism that anchors the ghosts. Paradoxically, the observers of the technology also fall in love with it, as if it were itself a desirable phantom forever out of reach, if not from the observers' awareness and enjoyment, from their means to materially possess it – a feeling not unlike that of Latin American film cultures through time, always in search for a cinema of regular production and global purchase that they can call their own. These ghosts make available spheres of visionary thought, which, when mobilized for criticism, results in visionary writing. In the many enigmas they leave in their wake – from where do they emanate? What sustains and carries them? When

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

will they pay attention to us? When will they suddenly cross the ontological barrier separating them from us? Will they meet us beyond life? – these variations on the ghost open up spaces for creative inquiry and remit us to a figure of the muses closer to Spanish baroque writer Francisco de Quevedo’s vision in *El Parnaso Español* than Greek mythology. Quevedo’s muses embrace *quotidie morimur* and see in constant death constant renewal, constant reinvention of the self. For Rosales and the Fugitive, death is the ultimate poetic act and, in the latter’s case, one that secures a new poetic existence. The projection’s proximity to the mystery of death makes them a point of encounter between the poetic and the unknown. I will propose how cinema emerges as just these ghosts in the eyes of a set of writers, and why the ghosts encourage their study through a passionate witnessing that locates their links to an enigmatic (that is, fertile for invention) world. The writing under discussion in the following pages finds itself in the grip of that passion.

But before I turn to the cinematic ghost’s capacity to enable poetic investigation, a few clarifications on the choice of stories are in order:

2.1.2 Origin Stories, or the Myths of Cinema’s Cultural Literacy

The goal of highlighting another metaphor available for cinema is multiple, but in a first instance, the purpose is to expand cinema’s cultural literacy, E. D. Hirsch’s term for the recognition and sharing of the associations of a national culture.¹⁵ What Pedullà has done is begin a process of definition of the foundational stories that construct cinema’s identity. In other words, he has argued that the culture of film theory has its own set of myths – not of theories or approaches, but of tales and legends that participate in the formation of cinema’s ideology. Speaking of an ideology of cinema or, rather, of cinema itself as an ideology, necessarily means

¹⁵ Quoted in Gregory Ulmer, *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 155.

understanding cinema as possessor of a particular imaginary that makes possible its discreet identification. It's a discourse of medium specificity based not on its properties, but in the stories that have been attached to it in pursuit of its accurate description. The mirror, the cave, and other less successful analogies are not mutually exclusive; instead, in the case of the first two, they represent cinema as dream and as a shadow of reality, two positions it can easily embody at the same time.

It is also significant that critics like Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy are speaking more frequently of cinema in terms of a set of aesthetic values as it seemingly fades away behind new media. It is by becoming a "cinemania," Lipovetsky and Serroy say, that film is able to transition from its formerly privileged place among forms of mass communication into a global phenomenon of a very different, but equally (if not more) powerful nature. They argue that

[i]t is pertinent to speak of a global screen because of cinema's amazing fortune. Film has lost its hegemonic position and looks increasingly like an outmoded and outdated form of expression as it competes with television and the digital media empire. However, it is precisely when cinema falls from its place as the dominant medium that it triumphs, paradoxically, in the realm to which it inherently belongs, not materially but imaginatively: it succeeds as grand spectacle and enchantment, as purveyor of stardom. There is something in hypermodern culture that can only be called *cinema-spirit* that runs through, irrigates, and nourishes all screens: cinema has become a circle whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere... The spirit of cinema gallops through screen spectacles of all kinds, spreading a cult of visual attractions and star personas.¹⁶

The persistence of cinema across the technologies that supersede it in reach and popularity (television, videogames, the internet) turns medium specificity into cultural specificity, and suggest a move from cinema as practice to cinema as ethos. Lipovetsky and Serroy's argument is problematic, in part, because it largely downplays the possibility that new media are not imitating or even learning from the cinema, and that not all post-cinematic media necessarily

¹⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *La pantalla global: Cultura mediática y cine en la era hipermoderna*, trans. (from French) Antonio-Prometeo Moya (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009), 24.

aspire to the condition of amazement that cinema, in its apogee, made manifest for the first time. However, their notion is an example of conceptions of cinema that allow its inhabitation of identity discourse, in the sense that a cultural literacy of its own can indeed exist and one that, significantly, turns cinema into a spirit, a specter, a *haunting* – in short, a conception of cinema that sees it more and more as the ghost nation it seemed designed to be.

On another level, the search for an alternative metaphor aims at making that metaphor an intelligible *chora* for the field of film studies at large – that is, at staking its claim for inclusion in the discipline through a process similar to the one both the cave and the mirror followed. For Gregory Ulmer, the deconstruction of original myths requires that new metaphors emerge from the existing ones.¹⁷ Now, it is not my intention to so much deconstruct the mirror or the cave, but rather to reenact the process by which those stories become part of cinema's cultural literacy. In translating Mexican film thought for English-language film studies, I propose the familiar tactic of analogical thinking that led to the advent of the mirror and the cave, only I have ransacked the Latin American canon in my quest for myths for Latin American film writing. The ghost's great advantage is that it was, unlike the cave and the mirror, directly inspired by the cinema. Because cinema spawned the ghost for itself, both as an image and as a concept, the allegorical parallels are very much intended, if not fully articulated as a presence guiding critical approaches to film in Latin America. I only wish to point out the extent to which the ghost runs (or rather gallops) through a set of critical texts from Latin American (and primarily Mexican) writers.

Yet the strongest case to start with a story is precisely an attempt at foregrounding a poetic mode of inquiry. Pedullà marvels at the turn to narratives for analogies to describe cinematic phenomena, and declares such a move is a deflection of the questions at hand rather than a direct engagement with them. Deploying a metaphor is, in this light, a placeholder to

¹⁷ Ulmer, *Heuristics*, 145.

which the writer resorts when descriptive language proves insufficient, or at least insufficient within the parameters of what counts as knowledge. Discipline Discourse, as Ulmer calls it, disallows the metaphor to remain a story, favoring instead an explanatory language that would minimize potential ambiguities. Of course, Discipline Discourse often appropriates stories for its pedagogical purposes – it is, in fact, constituted of stories, which are summarily accompanied by the decoding work of the critic. But why not let the story be the explanation? In his play *Proof* (2000), dramatist David Auburn has his mathematician protagonist speak thusly about the work of her father, another mathematician: “He used to write beautiful proofs. Perfect proofs. Proofs like music.”¹⁸ Even though it is not exactly Auburn’s point, the notion of a melody providing the retort to a question, implied in his proposition that a mathematical proof can respond with elegance and beauty, is the goal of poetic investigation, a form of which means the abandonment of the anxiety at the perceived incompleteness of analogical rhetoric.

The above is not a preamble for my own quotation of a story that I will send into the scholarship to fend for itself and call it “knowledge.” Indeed, I don’t believe it is necessary to remind ourselves that the conversation needs to continue, or that I am engaged in a process of multiple translations, not only of language, but of conceptions of an academic discipline, and that the one in which I am writing requires expository levels of engagement. What might be a more apt reminder is that the analogies would be more productively offered as fire-starters for imaginative possibilities that endlessly plumb the subject at hand. It is in their very inexactitude and limitations that they leave room open not just for critique, but also for multiple elaborations that refine, transform and contest the metaphors on a generative, rather than normative, territory.

¹⁸ David Auburn, *Proof: a Play* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), 14.

2.1.3 Ghosts and Latin American Cinema

The importance of the ghost for the period and place of theory and criticism I wish to underline is perhaps no greater than its importance for other times and geographies of film thought. It would be simply and glaringly inaccurate to suggest Latin American culture in general and Latin American film in particular have any sort of monopoly on phantoms or are in some ways particularly welcoming and fertile environments for ghosts, as certain (mis)conceptions of magical realism, *Día de los Muertos* and other traditions have suggested to several writers of note.¹⁹ As María Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren write in the introduction to their recent book, *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, “[i]t seems that ghosts are everywhere these days,”²⁰ right after they quote Derrida, “the most indelible recent theorist of haunting,” and his observation that “every period has its ghosts (and we have ours), its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media.”²¹ Writers born within the dominant discourses in film studies (if not all necessarily writing from one of the many perspectives of those discourses) have written engagingly and beautifully (indeed, poetically, another mode of writing that is by no means exclusive of Latin American film criticism) about the spectral materiality of cinema. Take Geoffrey O’Brien’s *The Phantom Empire*, where the American poet and essayist lists examples of how movies generate their own gravitational field in whatever room they are played:

All those rooms were realer than the screen (the screen was a toy occupying a small corner of the real), but the screen has somehow outlived them. The false images survived

¹⁹ Here, I’m put in mind of André Breton’s notion that, based on the highly influential engravings of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada (all of them depicting skeletons engaging in pratfallish gestures and celebratory activities), that Mexico “stands as the chosen land of black humor.” See Breton, “Lighting Rod” in *Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. André Breton, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997), xvii.

²⁰ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, “Introduction” in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, eds. Blanco and Peeren (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), ix.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 193, n21.

the mortals who idly allowed their eyes to dwell on them. It gets so bad you end up searching an unchanging celluloid surface for a clue to vanished worlds. As if by starting up the movie the people who once watched it together would start up too. Ghosts summoned by ghosts.²²

Ghost stories, then, may inspire a more confident, less tentative use of the adjective “universal.”

However, five realizations compel me to underscore the ghost for my set of writers.

First, Blanco and Peeren cite Derrida precisely because they believe something is missing in Derrida’s conception of haunting – namely, the location of ghosts (something to which O’Brien already alludes in his characterization of movies as beacons to guide ghosts to their meeting place):

Upon describing the (limited) possibility of demarcating the historical, philosophical and social “singularity” of haunting, however, [Derrida] pushes for a near immediate reinsertion of such explorations into what he calls a “much larger spectrological sequence.” This is in part due to Derrida’s insistence on haunting as a temporal, rather than spatial, phenomenon, where the ghost is not tied down to an idea of physical location.²³

For Blanco and Peeren, Derrida “forgets about the specificity of ghosts, the fact that they appear in specific moments, and specific locations, and also forgets that ghosts are,” as Roger Luckhurst put it, “*symptoms*, points of rupture that insist their singular tale be retold.” These ghosts can be non-figurative, like Faustine in Bioy Casares’s *La invención de Morel* and the unnamed actress in Quiroga’s “*El vampiro*,” and figurative, such as “marginalized citizens” (undocumented immigrants, *desaparecidos*, *sicarios* [assassins] from drug cartels, among many others) and “the intangible, spectral nature of modern media, ostensibly unmoored from distinct locations in time and space.” The multiple phantoms inform or, rather, “haunt each other, and should therefore be

²² Geoffrey O’Brien, *The Phantom Empire: Movies in the Mind of the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 26.

²³ Blanco and Peeren, *Popular Ghosts*, xiii.

considered in tandem in this case through a *conceptual* approach to the ghost.”²⁴ With this in mind, I will speak of the ghosts, be them metaphorical or literal, that haunt Mexican film criticism prior to the founding of its first film school in the 1960s.

Second, even if we acknowledge the undeniable presence of marginalized subjects in the region and think it would indeed allow us to consider an abundance of phantoms in Latin America, I would like to signal one out that criticism invokes very strongly: cinema itself, both as a consistent cultural practice and a technology. Or to be more specific, the production of a cinema that can be called Latin American, or even a film practice connected to a national identity (a desire Néstor García Canclini, among others, have located).²⁵ In the Mexican case, excluding the so-called *Edad de Oro* (Golden Age, roughly between 1930 and 1957), where American capital supported Mexican production during World War II, and the years of increased state funding under President Luis Echeverría in the seventies, the gap between the frequency of film releases from Mexico and from the Northern neighbor has been consistently large. For Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez, who writes about the end of the period known as the New Latin American Cinema (or NLAC, a creative explosion that extended through the 1970s and 1980s), the drying out of government resources for film production all over Latin America at the cusp of neoliberalism in the post-Soviet period also meant the withering of dreams of a group of emerging states. As part of these neoliberal measures, “where cultural products were increasingly seen as mere items of consumption, and where Latin American films were increasingly trans-Atlantic co-productions,” there was a prevailing sense that “the NLAC’s radical politics and sustained search for cultural autonomy and national identity might have already become a relic

²⁴ Ibid., xii.

²⁵ Néstor García Canclini, “Will There be a Latin American Cinema in the Year 2000? Visual Culture in a Postnational Era” in *Framing Latin American Cinema: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Ann Marie Stock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 246-258.

of the past.”²⁶ Criticism often took the role of mediums and attempted to summon the ghosts of a cinema that, for many, had flatlined. For Mexican writers throughout the decades I cover, it was necessary to keep an eye on ghosts of cinemas pasts and future. Chroniclers writing about the first screenings in the late 1890s and the first films with synchronized sound in the early 1930s despaired in the face of technological advancement in film from Europe and the United States, and pushed against what they saw as the cultural and linguistic impositions of a flood of foreign productions. Critics in the 1960s saw the end of the Golden Age and lamented the penchant for exploitation cinema in which Mexican film production had, in their view, descended. Cinema was always an elusive specter.

A third reason for locating specifically Latin American and Mexican ghosts is the fact that the hauntology of politics has other, cinematic ways of demanding a mediumistic criticism and the *séance* as its ritual. For example, Schroeder Rodríguez sees in the style of the NLAC how these films “systematically place marginalized subjects at the center of their narratives as a means to openly question racism, sexism, classism and other forms of exclusionist nationalist discourses.”²⁷ And to present these figurative ghosts, films often resorted to a phantasmatic style. The cinema of the late Chilean director Raúl Ruiz is an instance of a “baroque of the baroque,” in Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s words, since Ruiz’s cinema is not “a cinema of the seer, and no longer of the agent,” but a cinema of the visionary (or the medium), brimming with

pure *trompe l’oeil* and even *trompe l’esprit*, deceiving the mind. For the receptiveness and formal voracity of the procedure – from enormous close-ups to spatial deformation – achieves quite quickly a strange reflexivity of the camera, linking the visual eye of all these “optical images” to that eye of thought and memory (dear to Hamlet) which sees ghosts... those phantoms which haunt, as if repressed, the Latin American imaginary.²⁸

²⁶ Paul A. Rodríguez Schroeder, “After New Latin American Cinema” in *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁸ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, “The Baroque Eye of the Camera” in *Raúl Ruiz: Images of Passage*, eds. Helen Bandis, Adrian Martin and Grant McDonald (Melbourne: Rouge Press, 2004), 33-34.

Critics had many reasons to see ghosts at the movie theater, since the filmmakers frequently offered images that remitted them to encounters with wandering spirits. I will describe at length in the following chapters how the critics and theorists' interest in ghosts were replicated and encouraged by the films themselves.

Fourth, I believe the Latin American writers I have gathered here differ from their counterparts in film writing in the United States and Europe by consistently speaking of ghosts coming to the spectator rather than the spectator coming to the ghosts – that is, of an approach that invites the ghost to possess the spectator/critic. In our stories, Rosales and the Fugitive allow cinema to take them over, one by letting the ghost take his life (if we accept Grant's vampiric deduction), the other by transforming himself into a piece of cinema, or by letting cinema constitute him. Possession is a problematic metaphor partly because it implies that it is the ghost (the supposed subject of inquiry) the one that comes to learn about the writer, rather than the other way around, which are the positions that conventional notions of knowledge production assign to the parties involved. Also, the anxiety towards poetic forms of knowledge (a form of which is the fictional analogy) partially stems from how metaphors can be perceived as departing from, rather than opening up, the texts with which they purport to engage. Claiming that the ghost possesses the writer, who then lets the specter speak for itself through her, is an image saddled with the charges skeptics level at supposed psychics and fortune-tellers, from solipsism to cruel charlatanism. But let me contest those objections. On the subject of guiding metaphors, one that is often drafted to describe the act of criticism and investigation would be a story of exploration and colony, in which an intrepid soul (the critic) ventures *into* the uncharted territory that cinema makes available. Examples abound: Michael Taussig characterizes a new epistemology in anthropological writing that should aim “to penetrate the veil while retaining its

hallucinatory quality”²⁹ (the exploration of cinema should be a benevolent one, then); George Toles goes on to name cinema “a house made of light,”³⁰ again suggesting that cinema is a place to be inhabited, entered and, ideally, something to get lost into; and Adrian Martin tellingly titles a recent essay on film criticism “Incursions.” Even O’Brien rhapsodizes about of the “inhabitation” of a film, even when a few pages later, he will speak of film characters as presences in the life of the viewer – indifferent to that life (like Morel’s projections), but presences nonetheless. In his piece, however, Martin begins by questioning the very possibility of criticism creating partings into the fabric of cinema to illuminate it through written language. To do so, he quotes Roger Munier’s *Against the Image* as a work that denies the openness of cinema to its exploration through words. Martin suggests that for Munier,

[t]he realities of the world... do not reveal themselves when they are captured and projected on a screen for us, the cinema’s viewers. Rather, these objects and beings become mute, self-enclosed, *self-manifesting* in their “unconceptual hitherness.” They no longer require our intercession or interpretation as viewers or readers; they declare and interpret themselves. The world is “projected by itself, reaching us without our being able to exercise any real grasp upon it, without the possibility of any dialectical relationship between it and us.”³¹

Note how Munier rejects the coming of the world to the viewer and the unwillingness of objects to open up for us, as he believes they should. Several Latin American critics I investigate in fact do not disagree with Munier’s idea that the world is “self-manifesting” or “self-enclosed” on film. But what if it is us who open up to them? Horacio Quiroga, in his role of a film chronicler (a role inextricable from his identity as a fantasist) who wrote during the silent era and the first years of the sound film, speaks of cinema in terms very similar to Munier’s. But if the latter sees the “unconceptual hitherness” of filmed and projected objects and people as a problem for

²⁹ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 10.

³⁰ George Toles, *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 13.

³¹ Quoted in Adrian Martin. “Incursions” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, eds. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (New York: Routledge, 2011), 55.

criticism, Quiroga celebrates the fact that, in film, life itself is art's expression – not the embellishments of the artist, not the interventions of the craftspeople, but the very presence of things, persons. Quiroga differs fundamentally from Munier because, for the former, that is precisely what makes cinema an ideal subject for criticism – it makes available for the writer a splendor already present in the world, a beauty which is the raw material of poetic language... at least for those willing and able to spot it. He writes as much in a December 2nd, 1927 essay (published later in the same year as “*El vampiro*”) titled “La poesía en el cine,” (“*Poetry in Film*”):

Not all people possess the difficult gift to perceive beauty in an episode or demonstration of human effort that has made rivers of sweat run on the ground. Not for everyone is life in itself, without the need of disfigurement in the name of art, an inexhaustible source of poetry.

Realism in art, however gratuitous it seems to point out, is not a matter of education, but of constitution...

A love for truth cannot be acquired.³²

Put another way, criticism's job is not to effect incisions into cinema, for cinema does not need or allow such interventions. Instead, it encourages the inspired mind to take flight, to imagine and compose from cinema rather than into it. Quiroga's sense of criticism is more closely related, then, to what Stern and Kouvaros see as ekphrasis's double impulse: “On the one hand, there is a modest desire: for transparency in discourse, for verbal pictorialism... ; on the other, there is an extravagant desire, to bring things alive in writing.”³³ The more vivid the phantom, the more compelling the compositions it inspires. But that's not the only effect of thinking of the screen as a passage for the images rather than an entrance for the viewer: writing as if the image

³² Horacio Quiroga, *Arte y lenguaje del cine*, ed. Carlos Dámaso Martínez (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1997), 192.

³³ Leslie Stern and George Kouvaros, “Descriptive Acts” in *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sidney: Power Publications, 1999), 11.

has come before the writer prevents colonialist and patriarchal readings of the critical act, replacing the attempt to penetrate and conquer the screen world with an openness to the image's company.

Fifth, and most crucially, I find that in these Latin American writings, thinking of cinema as a ghost is the condition that allows for the existence of poetic investigation, and makes of creative inquiry a particularly fruitful approach to understanding, imagining, and then transmitting knowledge about cinema. Rather than a symptom, the ghost becomes a *sinthome*, an indecipherable expression of delight:

In the last years of his teachings, Jacques Lacan established the difference between symptom, and sinthome: in contrast to symptom, which is a cypher of some repressed meaning, sinthome has no determinate meaning; it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern, to some elementary matrix of *jouissance*, of excessive enjoyment.³⁴

The ghost is, in short, the cause of the Mexican critics' persistently imaginative take on cinema, since it inspires ecstasy and thus ecstatic writing. Along Blanco and Peeren's efforts, I find Eyal Peretz's recent study of Brian De Palma's cinema, *Becoming Visionary: Brian De Palma's Cinematic Education of the Senses*,³⁵ to be a cogent and fascinating theory of how cinema produces a haunting and how filmmakers that showcase that haunting (like De Palma) expose us to cinema's visionary powers. For Peretz, De Palma's oeuvre represents an investigation of the cinematic frame and how interrupting it, breaking it, and overcoming it (like Quiroga and Bioy Casares's autonomous projections do) let us peer into an enigmatic dimension of the world, which is "a blank, violent, decontextualizing, deframing principle of the uncontrolled opening

³⁴ Barbara Creed, "Woman as Death: *Vertigo* as Source" in *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adapter*, eds. R. Barton Palmer and David Boyd (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2011), 249.

³⁵ Peretz's book also attempts a project that my own sometimes mirrors, arguing for how the ghost can surpass the cave and the mirror as a persistent, inescapable analogy for cinema. Peretz actually begins with a critique of Plato's cave.

and closing of existence.”³⁶ I am interested in the blank and frameless realms cinema can uncover, which in Peretz’s account, are always haunting what we see on the screen. The frameless suggests the autonomy of the phantom, and the blankness in its wake is the mystery propelling poetic invention. Peretz’s argument succeeds in bringing together the spectrality of the cinematic image, of what happens when it comes to the foreground to rupture the frame, and how this phenomenon offers a blank space of possibility not unlike a virtual blank page the writer can then fill. It is on this fifth level that I will develop my own claims on notable pieces of writing by the first Mexican film reviewers, whose output binds questions of a desire for technology, of becoming possessed by the cinema and of seeing it as a source of creative invention.

2.1.4 Bullets through the Screen: First Encounters with Cinema in Mexico

I would like to start thinking from the frame and move towards Peretz’s understanding of it (and how such understanding allows a thinking of cinema as a source of invention) by looking at noted initial reactions to an experience of cinema. It would not take an enormous leap to imagine the early days of film, when it was a novel invention, as the ideal time for writers to wax rhapsodic, perplexed and apoplectic about the new medium, their every word about it an embellished statement of their celebration, derision or puzzlement. It was a time when writers were free of a history of reflections on film to which, consciously or unconsciously, they would’ve had to respond – in short, the time to begin inventing cinema on writing. But while it would be wrong to suggest writers did not have the tools to tackle the cinematic phenomenon, or

³⁶ Eyal Peretz, *Becoming Visionary: Brian De Palma’s Cinematic Education of the Senses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 76. This is Peretz’s description of one of Heidegger’s insights in the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

nothing to which to compare it, they might also be excused, in the service of selling their columns and articles, for having played up the thrill of the new. And perhaps the literary impulse toward the evocative, a mode of writing readily inclined to grope its way into the unknown, contributed to making several of those early remarks endure and transform, from journalistic accounts delivered with gusto to something more persuasive. Take Maxim Gorky's famous thoughts on the train in the Lumière Brothers' film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*: "It speeds right at you – watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack full of lacerated flesh and splintered bones."³⁷ Tom Gunning recuperates Gorky's text in his landmark essay "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," to illustrate his argument that the stories of terrified audiences are either apocryphal or motivated by something other than actual belief in the reality of the train on the screen: "[Gorky's] recognition that the film image combined realistic effects with a conscious awareness of artifice may correspond more closely to general audience reaction than the screaming dupes of traditional accounts."³⁸ In reading early audience's awareness of the illusions of cinema in Gorky's words (their incredulity, their knowledge that what they were seeing was merely "a train of shadows"), Gunning simultaneously opened the possibility to think of the former's description as purely hyperbolic, a tale designed to capture the vividness of the cinematic image that Quiroga's Rosales also tried to describe to his friend in "*El vampiro*." Gorky's tale seems to have taken hold, endowing visions of film's first audiences with the allure of a fiction that clearly demarcates the past from the present in its suggestion of a clear sense of progress in viewer sophistication. It is an almost irresistible notion, beautiful in its simplicity and the innocence it bestows upon its characters. The possibility of thinking of Gorky's take as an

³⁷ Quoted in Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 864.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

ingenious, poetic solution to his task of conveying in words a lived experience might serve as an entry into an investigation of how cinema inspires verbal invention.

It is interesting to point out how in Gorky, as in Quiroga, the sense of the compellingly real power of the objects and people on film has something to do with how they seem to overcome, or at least to be capable of overcoming, the confines of the frame. The danger of the train's bursting into the room and crushing everything and everybody increases when it "plunge[s] into the darkness in which you sit" – it is then that it might "unfasten" itself from the screen. The sensation might stem from an understanding of the screen as a permeable window/barrier. Gorky, for one, seems interested in how the screen operates as a boundary that's impossible to cross, so that its crossing clearly signals the occurrence of a genuine transmutation. The screen is, in Peretz's words, "a figure of delimitation and of the slicing of a fragment out of a larger whole."³⁹ If the train charged through the screening room, the slicing effect would break and the world outside the screen would become one with the world within it. What was once a fragment would magically turn into a whole.

Expecting this transformation, or the sudden manifestation of continuity between the world and the screen, depends largely on an awareness of the screen itself. To envision the train stepping out of the picture, one has to know there is a finite picture in the first place. But what if the very presence of a screening surface were questioned, or even periodically forgotten? If Gorky hoped to weave an atmosphere of credulity to impress upon readers some of cinema's power (even if that was only a fictional credulity), what other kinds of credulity might have been drafted to give stories about watching film a literary allure? When anatomizing early cinematic audiences in Mexico, Carlos Monsiváis paints a picture where audience credulity, in terms of their awareness of the screen, reaches new levels. And Monsiváis, like Gunning, also invokes a

³⁹ Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 92.

story from a novelist and intellectual to speculate about what might have happened to those early viewers – in this case, an episode from Martín Luis Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente* (*The Eagle and the Snake*, 1916), the author’s celebrated memoir of civil struggles in Mexico in the first decades of the twentieth century. Guzmán, who fought with Francisco Villa’s troops during the Revolution, relates an event at the Convention of Aguascalientes, where a series of screenings showing several Mexican public figures ensued: first, then President General Venustiano Carranza entering the northern city of Saltillo. Next, Villa himself, whom Guzmán describes as “magnificent... legendary, dominating,”⁴⁰ and finally, another film of Carranza, this time riding his horse into Mexico City. Even though it was Carranza who first organized the convention in 1914, arguing for the need of a gathering of the leadership of the many armies and factions involved in the Revolution to discuss matters of state, by 1916 the event had been taken over primarily by Villa’s forces, who opposed Carranza. Villa’s appearance on the screen, unsurprisingly, ignited applause. Carranza’s, on the other hand, inspired quite another reaction, which Guzmán witnessed from behind the screen as the projection continued:

We, however, did not see the end of the film because something happened unexpectedly which made us run away from our place behind the screen. Don Venustiano was, of course, the celebrity that appeared most often on the screen. His ever more frequent appearances had been becoming, as was to be expected, more and more irritating to the Conventionist audience. From hissing mixed with applause on the first occasions that he was seen, it moved to frank hissing; then to hissing bordering on whistling; then to open catcalls and finally to complete bedlam. In this way, in mounting stages, it ended up, when the scene of Carranza entering Mexico City on horseback was shown, in a sort of hellish uproar which culminated with two shots being fired.

Both projectiles hit the screen at the exact spot where the chest of the Supreme Commander was outlined and ended up embedded in the wall, one half a meter above Lucio Blanco and the other, closer still, between Domínguez’s head and mine.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Quoted in Carlos Monsiváis, “All the People Came and Did Not Fit Onto the Screen: Notes on the Cinema Audience in Mexico” in *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, trans. Ana López (London: BFI, 1995), 146.

⁴¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 146.

It is interesting to observe what functions Guzmán's near-death experience performs for Monsiváis. The latter's introduction of Guzmán's tale, in his piece "All the People Came and Did Not Fit Onto the Screen: Notes on the Cinema Audience in Mexico," is rather telling, for he is not only willing to allow for a passionate, horrified credulity in Mexican audiences, but also to reinforce it by explicitly inserting the Lumières' train into his own analysis:

Silent cinema is the source of both inhibitions and enthusiasm. The spectators waver between supreme delight and terror when faced with these moving images which shelter them when they close their eyes or else cause them to run away when the train hurtles out of the screen towards the seats... [A]t the Convention of Aguascalientes, the Revolutionaries watched a newsreel film, and their inability to distinguish between their own loyalties and phobias and what was happening on the screen led them to take action.⁴²

If Gunning's project was to an extent to debunk the myth of the credulous spectator, Monsiváis's reading of Guzmán appears at first glance to buy into it wholesale. Instead of shifting nervously in their seats before the train juggernaut, the revolutionaries opened fire at the screen. But there are several instances that complicate the role of this story in Monsiváis's richly paradoxical essay. First and foremost, Monsiváis foregrounds the turmoil that kept Mexico's national stability out of reach, and proposes that violent history as a factor of responses to cinema that could be considered naïve or overtly enthusiastic: "Three centuries as a colony and a century of battles to construct the nation provides a general but also precise explanation as to why modernity was incorporated only partially into Mexican society and for the interminable wonder at the 'marvels of civilization' which reveals the extent of this cultural lag."⁴³ In this light, it seems the already strong sentiments viewers brought into the Aguascalientes convention were bound to climax in a moment of "inability to distinguish between their loyalties and phobias."⁴⁴ In Gunning's reading, Gorky's audiences had the shock of modernity's unchecked stimuli in

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 146.

mind when they sat to watch the train, but Guzmán's people came into the theater practically fresh off the battleground, taking with them the atmosphere of war, and its heightening of emotion, into the screening room.

But if such a mindset resulted, for Monsiváis, in a veneration of modern wonders (and, he adds, a “bitter admiration for North America”⁴⁵), Paulo Antonio Paranaguá suggests other feelings might have an equally strong presence when he observes that “[u]ndoubtedly, for the first time in Latin America, if not in the world, Mexico witnessed the birth of a contemporary political cinema directly linked to major national social upheavals.”⁴⁶ Paranaguá wishes to stress, following historian Aurelio de los Reyes, that cinema was, from the start, intimately related to a national project in Mexico, adding to something like Gorky's accounts a layer of investment in the images where the question of the status of the objects on the screen is immediately politicized. So if credulity was, indeed, among the reactions of early audiences, it is important to consider their likely inclination to place themselves within a national imaginary – that they already occupied a state of fantasy, of openness to belief, as it were, when the screening began. Indeed, credulity is a myth insofar as it is seen as the protagonist of a romantic story about the innocence of early audiences and not just one (if perhaps unlikely) element of countless encounters with the cinema.

Yet the question of credulity that Monsiváis underscores must also come into question. Revolutionary fervor might have taken part in shaping attitudes toward the cinematic frame and what was contained within it. But weren't the shots fired at the screen also a deliberately spectacular assertion of the audience's animosity toward their enemy, a paroxysm to which the armed viewers gave themselves? Just as Gorky might have poetically exaggerated the extent of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁶ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, “Ten Reasons to Love or Hate Mexican Cinema” in *Mexican Cinema*, 1.

the audience's belief in the reality of the train in the film, the shots fired that night at the Convention of Aguascalientes could have been a consciously symbolic act, not a display of belief in the image, but a voluntary game with the possibility – the “what if?” that begins the process of crafting many a fictional tale – of having Carranza materialize in front of them after stepping out of the film. For a moment, audiences imagined President Carranza left the screen so they could shoot him. In an environment of intensities brewing before a technology that played with light and shadows in the dark, reports that appear to betray a confusion between film and reality become stories of imaginative leaps that endowed the screen figures with extra-cinematic life. The viewers consciously become ghost-seers.

I take this unfair comparison between Paris's urbane, middle-class early cinema audiences with Aguascalientes's revolutionaries to be not so much symptomatic of each audience's respective disposition, but rather to show two different attitudes toward a similar event – namely, the violation of the boundaries of the screen. Like the ghosts of Quiroga and Bioy Casares, something either came out of the screen or posited that the screen was altogether absent. In one case, the reaction became an exclamation, perhaps an involuntary gasp. In another, it was immediate action that, I argue, could be seen as a belligerent *poiesis* of motion that put bullets through the screen. But how does the rupture of the screen lead to poetic inspiration? Is there anything about these stories that suggests an intimate relationship between the screen and imagination?

On the one hand, the very notion of the rupture of the screen by the figures within it is a flight of fancy in itself. On the other, there is no end of stories based on or about just this kind of encounters with the uncanny. But more crucially, the screen itself has been a sight of invention since cinema's early days, the medium's expressive and narrative possibilities quickly apparent

to many of its first technicians and witnesses. To support my contention that there is a tradition of film thought in the years that precede the emergence of academic film studies in Mexico; that such tradition is predominantly heuritic (in the sense that it treats cinema as a foundation for inventiveness), non-positivist and dedicated to the proliferation, rather than establishment, of theories; and that the heuritic impulse is associated with a spectral conception of cinema, it is necessary to provide an account for how film's spectrality enables creative processes. Specifically, I will turn to Peretz's work on Brian De Palma's films for a theory of how the framed, screened condition of film allows its transformation into a frameless, autonomous projection (its metamorphosis into a phantom) to spur poetic inquiries.

2.1.5 Phantoms and Futurity, or Spectral Inspiration

Peretz's analysis of De Palma's films, in particular *Carrie* (1976), *The Fury* (1978) and *Blow-Out* (1981), brings together the cinematic theories of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze and the Lacanian concept of the suture to reconceive De Palma's career as a sustained investigation of the nature of the cinematic frame. Peretz describes how De Palma's cinematic image shows viewers an excess outside the frame, outside the world of perception to the senses as understood in Platonic metaphysics. His argument eventually says that all cinema (not just De Palma's) enables a "new thinking" in which the realm of ideas is not a transcendental world inaccessible to the senses, but rather, "an immanent outside," an Other to the senses that is nonetheless internal to and inseparable from the senses. Crucially, Peretz calls this other of perception a "ghost." But before defining how that Other is the territory of visionary perception, it is best to start with how cinema enables a kind of thinking that problematizes the relationships between inside and outside, and how one can be folded into the other. And on this subject, Peretz turns to

Cavell and his distinctions between the frame in painting and the frame in photography, and how they represent different logics of delimitation: “you can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. This generally makes no sense asked from a painting. You can ask these questions of objects in photographs because they have answers in reality. The world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame; at its frame, the world finds its limits.” In a photograph, on the other hand, “the world comes to an end,” as the frame “cut[s] out” or “rejects” the rest of the world. Taking this line of thought into film, Cavell proposes that “the screen has no frame, that is to say, no border. Its limits are not so much the edges of a given shape as they are the limitations, or capacity, of a container.”⁴⁷ Peretz then lingers on Cavell’s characterization of the logic of the photographic frame as one of rejection, and on his observation that the border of the screen forms a structure of imperfect limits rather than a closed geometric space. Rejection belies a certain anxiety at the heart of the process of photography, and that anxiety is associated with what is revealed by the limits of the frame: not closure, but rather, openness, or in Peretz’s words, “the *opening* of the world, wishing *opening* to be heard as a verb rather than as a substance.”⁴⁸ The frame exposes the world’s incompleteness.

So that which lies outside the frame, beyond constituting the places and things left off-screen – what Deleuze calls a “relative outside,” which is contiguous with what is on screen – confronts the viewer with the unveiling of “a dimension different than things, the dimension of the world’s activity of opening.” Whenever the frame performs its “slicing” of the world, it not only brings to the attention of the senses (the eye, in particular) objects and spaces in the world – it also exposes another world altogether, one that perturbs both the wholeness of perception (or the totality of that which perception could potentially contain), and of the viewer herself. The

⁴⁷ Quoted in Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, (his emphasis).

disturbance comes from a growing awareness of an inability to master what we see in the frame, and which is counteracted with the process of suture. The latter has been defined, among others, by Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan, as the mitigation of the disquiet the discovery of the frame produces in the viewer, by making present to consciousness (to frame, as it were) that which is not framed. Films themselves can provide that relief, through counter-shots that explain a camera perspective, or through a simple pan that frames something that was previously off-screen. And yet, the limits of the cinematic image cannot help but draw attention to themselves and to the fact that for every moment they capture, there is an entire world that remains unseen and unperceivable, an “absolute outside” in Deleuze’s words, which for Peretz is connected to the frame by a principle of “discontinuity” and fragmentation. The world opens when the frame reminds viewers that in its process of selecting, it decontextualizes “a fragment of a larger continuity,” thus interrupting it and conjuring an unsettling sense of the world’s non-totality.⁴⁹

It is now that Peretz wonders:

And can we not then say... that this anxiety-provoking opening, the outside of the frame that, as Cavell says, is implicitly present in the image, is therefore inscribed in the very heart of the frame, disturbing the inside, as something not present in it and thus strange and incomprehensible? We might thus describe the way in which the world’s opening is strangely inscribed at the heart of the frame, I claim, as a ghostly and absent disturbance, or as an enigmatic haunting, of that which the frame does not contain.⁵⁰

Peretz’s formulation percolates through my description of the approach of early film writers in Mexico because of his location of a haunting in the cinematic frame and because of how he understands this haunting as being intertwined with the frame’s limits. More specifically, the realization of the ghostly dimension of the frame is in fact connected to the rupture of the frame. The ghost appears as an excess beyond the frame, in that the haunting of the world’s opening becomes most apparent, most deeply felt, when filmmakers add an enigmatic element that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 54.

exceeds the frame and suggests both the off-screen space and the opening of the world. It is there when, in the opening scene of *The Fury*, a foot from a character whose body we have not yet seen comes into view, first inserting a mystery whose answer seems to lie off-screen, but that in fact cannot be solved by simply framing the person to whom that foot belongs, as the narrative has not explained who the character is; it is there when De Palma conjures up one of his trademark split screens, slicing the slice, as it were, and revealing a delimitation that folds the absolute outside into the frame, turning it into an immanent outside. The image is then effectively possessed by an enigma. It is in those moments, when the ghostly dimension is revealed, that a specter abandons the screen. These are the instances when it is clearest how the film image is an apparition, like Quiroga's vampire and Bioy Casares's Faustine.

Becoming aware of the specter, however, requires more than sight, or indeed more than the senses that create at least a semblance of mastery of the perceivable. For if, according to Peretz, cinema tends to cater to a "paranoid spectator," one that perpetually seeks to close up the open enigmas by laying eyes on whatever might complete a picture of off-screen space, De Palma instead attempts to reconstruct the viewer as "a telepathic witness"⁵¹ of the world's opening. In other words, another sense is necessary for that witnessing, one that is attuned to fragmentation, blankness and nothingness. The viewer sees the image with her eyes, and feels the enigma with her visionary sense. But if the phantom is indeed immanent to the frame, and the frame itself presents its own spectral rupture, then sensory and extrasensory perception happen simultaneously, and if sensory perception deals with that which can be seen/framed, extrasensory perception is the discovery of that which cannot be seen/framed. The cinematic image calls for not only the viewer's perception, but also for perception's Other.

⁵¹ Ibid., 67.

And what is the Other of perception if not imagination, the going-beyond of what is in front of us? When Peretz reads *The Fury* as an allegory of the process of suture, he highlights a scene in which Gillian (Amy Irving), a woman with telekinetic and telepathic powers, attends a class with others like her where they practice their special abilities. Dr. Lindstrom (Carol Eve Rossen) gives her instructions: “Visualize sitting in an empty theater, in front of a blank screen, and let that screen fill your mind.” Gillian’s entrance in this hypnotic state has two consequences – her operation, through force of will, of a toy train, and her hallucination of a dead man, covered in blood. The former is the transformation of thought into movement, the coming-into-being of something imagined that was not there before. The latter is a vision of the future, of a death that, in the film’s story, has not yet happened. The encounter with the blank screen is thus a horrifying location of the world’s incompleteness, the no-place to be filled, in Hollis Frampton’s words, “with images of [our] own devising.”⁵² And is not the blank screen a close relative of the blank page, the archetypal image that serves as a preamble for literary invention? Both blank surfaces, the screen and the page, invite an excursion into unknown territories of writing, the ghosting of the phantom in the frame as a search for the words that will describe it – words that need to be invented through their visionary discovery.

Peretz finds in De Palma’s exuberant style a pedagogy of the senses that coaches them to spot hauntings. At the same time, his argument extends to all films, in that every cinematic image, given its framed quality, is always already haunted. So while some filmmakers might be more persistent and successful in their ghost-watching than others, they are all participating in the production of what José de la Colina called “an art of ghosts.”⁵³ De Palma stands out because of how often he subverts the techniques of conventional film grammar that most powerfully

⁵² Hollis Frampton, “Notes on Special Effects,” *Harvard Film Archive*, last modified December 2, 2014, <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2011janmar/frampton.html>

⁵³ José de la Colina, *Un arte de fantasmas* (Mexico City: Textofilia, 2013).

shield viewers from the image's haunting, despite his own established place as a filmmaker deeply indebted to the classical style. Or if "classical style" is too specious a term, it might be more appropriate to think of it as a style that optimizes the process of suture. Theorists like Oudart, Dayan, Stephen Heath and David Bordwell have listed the elements of film style that constitute Peretz's paranoid spectator, the one that is forever searching to close the gap opened by each frame with another frame – one that subjectivizes an unknown objectivity, for example. But other theorists of the suture have pointed out that while some features of classical film grammar do indeed work towards allaying the potential anxieties of the enigmas the frame can generate, it would be erroneous to assume all features of film language mean the same for every film history. Slavoj Žižek in particular issues a warning against discussing certain filmic concepts, like depth of field, as examples of a universalizing view of stylistic choices: "It is misleading to conceive of these concrete figurations... as subspecies of the universal genus." The visual techniques' role in enabling or problematizing suture depends on "the mediated totality of each historical epoch of cinematic style, the way [they are] located in the articulated whole of artistic procedures."⁵⁴ Warren Buckland understands Žižek's pronouncements as reminders that the implications of shot patterns and editing syntax must be read across both historical periods and cultures. The frame might be a constant, but how it enters the problem of sense-making is not.⁵⁵

Yet however many shot patterns are available at any given time, those reflections depend on the assumption that complex film languages have been developed, and this chapter is about cinema's earliest spectators and first manifestations. Many of film's familiar "artistic procedures" had not yet taken hold, so cinema's initial audiences, its first critics and theorists

⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), 18.

⁵⁵ Warren Buckland, *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 157.

among them, had to converse with the frame and its haunting without many of cinema's exorcizing strategies. Does that mean they had a more direct confrontation with cinema as a ghost, thus making them more receptive to its visionary qualities? Recent studies and recoveries of Lacanian perspectives on film suggest that early audiences did experience something more intensely before the screen: namely, the Lacanian Real. The unreachable object of the audience's desire, the "*objet petit a*," belongs to the dimension of the Real, and the viewer encounters it, says Ke-Ming Lin, "once [she] 'enters' the film discourse"⁵⁶ or when she "believes the film is real."⁵⁷ Lin observes that the possibility of belief in the reality of the film, or at least the prospect of being astonished at the vividness of film's images, was strongest in the medium's youngest years, the times that originated the myth of the credulous spectator that was briefly unprotected from cinema's exposure of its phantom. In this psychoanalytic light, the audience's shock at the train came from their bumping into the Real, that realm forever unattainable through representation. Similarly, President Carranza's appearance on the screen immediately ignited animosity, for it presented audiences with something they desired: the opportunity to kill their enemy. And it all happened before cinema trained its viewers to see it with its own language.

The proposed encounter with the Real has a strong connection with Peretz's enigmatic dimension, in that they both are an excessive "blind spot" within a different, more evident order – the Real, for Žižek, is an external difference within the Symbolic, while the ghost-like enigma lies inside perception. Both the Real and the enigma are immanent outsides. They are also the elements whose immanence prevents the orders to which they are inherent from achieving completeness. Buckland remarks that, in Žižek's view, "it is the Real that blocks any notion that

⁵⁶ Ke-Ming Lin, "The Lacanian spectator: Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Cinema" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2007), 17, <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations/AAI3275744>

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

the Symbolic is self-sufficient and fully enclosed within itself. More generally, it is because the Real is in the Symbolic that the Symbolic necessarily fails.”⁵⁸ Buckland further indicates that Žižek’s reworking of these Lacanian categories builds upon Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau’s theories of hegemony, which see it as “a temporary moment of stability created between diverse contingent groups within an otherwise unstable society” marked by “indeterminacy and plurality.”⁵⁹ It is consent among these groups that leads to the adoption of the hegemonic rule as a universal norm, and yet because it is contingent, hegemony is perpetually open to revision, like the incomplete Symbolic. Compare those statements to Peretz’s when he speaks of the effects of witnessing the immanent outside and how it redefines a Platonic vision of metaphysical ideas – in this case, freedom:

[T]he discovery... of the outside... promises a new conception of freedom and of political life, thus of human relations. Freedom now no longer equals a liberation from shadows to the pure light of truth but, rather, the opening into the phantom of the internal outside, to this haunting dimension of excess which, by marking within the cave/frame a trace of the infinite Other, this dimension of a nothing and a potentiality always in excess of the actual inside of the frame, this dimension we can also call time, leaves the cave/frame open to transformation, never allowing it to close in upon itself.⁶⁰

Both Žižek and Peretz wish to underscore the impermanence of power structures and how it is guaranteed by the inevitable haunting of a different world inscribed within them. But the difference between their approaches, and between the Real and the phantom, is that while both are presences of an absence, the latter is decidedly a *capacity*, a pure future potential that awaits conversion into a new present. The Real is an unrepresentable residue that words, images and ideologies cannot populate and thus is intimately linked to futurity. Instead, Peretz is after a blankness that can take the shape of a new politics, only to remain partially formed and ripe for transformation into another: “This blankness, time, that is beyond the world is no longer a realm

⁵⁸ Buckland, *Film Theory*, 154.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 154.

of ideal substances nor a destinal and unknown future that can prophetically be predicted; it is nothing but the fact that the world is incomplete, that there is more than the (actual) world; there is an excess beyond it in the sense that the world can transform, can open up unpredictably; in other words, the world has a future.”⁶¹

The accent on futurity is appropriate because, as I will describe below, film chroniclers in the early twentieth century write about cinema with a keen awareness of its promise. It is as if the subject of their writings is not the present cinema, but what it will become. And so the form their writing takes resembles the response to a vision of this ghost, not a revenant from the past but the opening to a place where there is room for inventing new languages and new lives. Both Rosales and the Fugitive in Quiroga and Bioy Casares’s tales see prospects in their ghosts, some terrifying, some exhilarating, and others both at the same time. Pursuing those prospects in the presence of the phantom spurs a poetic act, and even actual poetry. Take the following passage from *The Invention of Morel*, where The Fugitive, a man who has jeopardized his future by escaping justice, considers approaching the spectral Faustine:

It must be my nerves that make me feel this urge to write. And the reason I am so nervous is that everything I do now is leading me to one of three possible futures: to the woman, to solitude (or the living death in which I spent the past few years, an impossibility now that I have seen the woman), or to a horrible sentence. Which one will it be? Time alone will tell. But still I know that writing this diary can perhaps provide the answer; it may even help produce the right future.⁶²

The Fugitive goes on to make a garden in which to court his beloved, gathering flowers from the island. Then he spends time composing a message to inscribe on it, an epigram that passes through four different versions:

1. Sublime, close at hand but mysterious
With the living silence of the rose.

⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁶² Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, 31-32.

2. You have awakened me from a living death on this island.
3. You have kept a dead man on this island from sleeping.
4. I am no longer dead: I am in love.⁶³

Ultimately, by his own admission, the Fugitive “lost his courage” and settled for something far more banal. Under the flowers, he writes: “The humble tribute to my love.”⁶⁴ But despite his failure to produce verses that satisfied him, his impulse was to create something, in both his environment and language, to fulfill an unpredictable future, testifies to the muse-like effects of the phantom. The tradition of film criticism that emerged in Mexico followed the Fugitive in falling in love with the specter of cinema, and letting it inspire its authors to write poetically and invent the time to come.

Before exploring a few examples from that tradition in the following section, a necessary acknowledgment: in making the case for the ghost as muse, I have largely drawn from a set of theoretical texts deeply entrenched in Western cinema and media studies – I am still within the comforts of the discipline to which I hope to show a counterpart. Does this not constitute, then, a betrayal of the tradition that I am yet to define – that is, am I not describing one tradition in terms of another, thus folding it into it? Yes. That is precisely the case. Beyond the language transference that remains the primary obstacle to the inclusion of many Spanish-language texts into Anglophone media studies, the work of translation extends to the level of methodology, so the present text cannot engage entirely with poetic investigation without adopting the ethos of its source disciplinary language. On this point, I do not entirely believe that *omnis traductor*

⁶³ Ibid., 31-33.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 33

trador,⁶⁵ but what I attempt here is, perhaps, a decriminalization of the sort of betrayals translation can perpetrate. Having said that, any study of film discourse in Latin America cannot sidestep the hegemonic spread of theories like Lacanian psychoanalysis. It must instead explore the ways in which the theories have been appropriated, interpreted, and transmuted in the works of writers from the region. The fate of Rosales and the Fugitive is instructive in this case, when understood from the perspective of Argentinean writer Daniel Link's definition of the ghost. In his book *Fantasmas. Imaginación y sociedad*, Link rehearses a series of propositions on imagination as "one of the defining signs" of aesthetic movements of the twentieth century, and he sees their central figures – characters, stories, institutions and communities – as taxonomical levels of a phantasmagoria, each a ghost of a special kind. Link then borrows an insight from Alberto Moreiras to summon the Lacanian ghost from Althusser's notion of interpellation. Link's ghost is "an impression of a figure that is difficult to grasp: a figure that remains uninterpellated, indeed beyond interpellation, not because interpellation never reaches it, but rather because it marks the very limits of interpellation."⁶⁶ If interpellation is part of the process of self-formation, the encounter with Peretz's spectral conception of cinema – with its muse-like conception, as it were – encourages imagination to inhabit interpellation's limits, and to think of those limits as other than the end of the self. Rosales and the Fugitive both destroy themselves while reaching the ghost. In David Mamet's words, they "achieve unbeing."⁶⁷ Their loss of their selves, however, is also a *sinthomic* expression on their part: not a self-destructive but a self-

⁶⁵ See Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

⁶⁶ Daniel Link, *Fantasmas: Imaginación y sociedad*, (Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia, 2009), 11. Link's definition of the ghost is in fact taken verbatim from an excerpt of Alberto Moreiras, "Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference" in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1, no. 1 (2004), <http://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ojsbct/index.php/bct/article/viewFile/15/3>. Moreiras's "impression" results from his juxtaposition of images from Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Derrida's "Du marxisme. Dialogue avec Daniel Bensard." Link takes the outcome of the juxtaposition, as Moreiras characterizes it, to be a ghost.

⁶⁷ David Mamet, *Theatre* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2007), 148.

transformative action made in light of the phantom's confirmation of futurity. They chase not death, but change. Taken into film criticism, the ghost on the screen inspires writing where the world and the self can be changed. If ghosts lie at the limits of interpellation, approaching them as they manifest in cinema, they represent a critical conundrum, one that Roland Barthes characterized in his *Mythologies*:

[E]ither to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or... to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poeticize... We constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state that is still mystified.⁶⁸

Keeping in mind that interpellation can reach Link's ghosts, they still seem to escape ideology. Poeticizing them, then, makes sense. The writers in the pages that follow set about to do just that.

2.2 THE FILM CHRONICLER AS MEDIUM:

TOWARD A METAHISTORY OF EARLY MEXICAN FILM CRITICISM

2.2.1 Introduction: the Chronicle as a Poetic Form of Film Criticism

It would be unduly ambitious to attempt to tell a history of Latin American film reflection, or even just of Mexican film reflection, in any truly comprehensive way in a limited space. Instead, I will follow Hollis Frampton's lead and build a "metahistory." Frampton explained the difference thusly: "the history of cinema consists precisely of every film that has ever been made, for any purpose whatsoever... The metahistorian of cinema, on the other hand, is occupied with inventing a tradition, that is, a coherent, wieldy set of discrete monuments, meant to

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Levers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 158-159.

inseminate resonant consistency into the growing body of his art.”⁶⁹ In this case, I substitute “cinema” with “film reflection,” and I have already nominated three monuments: Quiroga’s “*El vampiro*,” Bioy Casares’s *The Invention of Morel*, and Martín Luis Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente*. Metahistories do not need to be chronological, and so their order here is dictated for their move from fiction into more hybrid forms of writing from which a sense of poetic inquiry can be constructed. “El vampiro” is a short story, and *Invention* and *El águila...* are both novels, the latter already taking an autobiographical, non-fictional turn. From this point on, all but one of the texts conforming the “coherent, wieldy set” of works of the poetic tradition of investigation belong to the genre of the *crónica*, or chronicle, which serves as the nexus between the analytical and creative impulses because it is, for Viviane Mahieux, a “somewhat unstructured genre that combines literary aestheticism with journalistic form.” Mahieux goes on to say that “the Latin American *crónica...* has been surprisingly successful... at consolidating critical recognition with popular appeal.”⁷⁰ That is to say, these Latin American writers write with an eye for both illuminating an enchanting the reader, perhaps never buying into Barthes’s dichotomy in the first place.

Mahieux’s work is particularly useful for the period observed in this chapter. She finds in the “discursive fluidity” of the *crónica* a perfect literary embodiment of the quick, unpredictable pace of urban modernity in the largest cities in Latin America: “These cities grew immensely during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, each in its own way. Buenos Aires and Mexico City were cosmopolitan centers with a tradition in journalism and a press industry that

⁶⁹ Hollis Frampton, *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 136.

⁷⁰ Viviane Mahieux, *Urban Chroniclers in Modern Latin America: The Shared Intimacy of Everyday Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 1.

was expanding to meet the demands of a growing educated middle class.”⁷¹ And even though Mexico was “still reeling from the 1910 revolution” and “most readers still came from high social tiers... its print culture was on the rise.”⁷² The chronicle also provided an excellent forum for writers to find regular work outside their more sporadic pieces in other literary genres, and reach a wider and more loyal audience as culture became increasingly commodified: “For all its unsettling aspects, urban change was, [for chroniclers in the 1920s] an opportunity to ensure that their columns became necessary reading.”⁷³ At the same time, the columns gave them a space to experiment with style and forms of social and political participation. As Mahieux elaborates:

Because the chronicle responds both to aesthetic influences and concrete events, it was particularly subject to the changes that affected the lives and tastes of city dwellers in the 1920s. It also absorbed and reflected some of the most urgent issues put forth by the avant-gardes of the period – namely, a questioning of cultural hierarchies, a political engagement, a will to provoke a complacent public, and at the same time, a belief in the role of art and literature in the construction of a modern identity. The chroniclers of the 1920s and 1930s were active participants in the cities they described, and their articles combined erudite knowledge, literary style, and media savvy with street credibility. By embracing a plurality of registers, they transformed the heterogeneity of the chronicle into a unique means of intervening in both literature and society.⁷⁴

A few chronicles in this metahistory were written as far back as the 1890s, since the tendencies Mahieux describes were incipient well before the 1920s, and when it came to film chronicles, the speedily shifting trends already resulted in strategies many chroniclers shared. A notable example is the frequent choice of signing every column with a pseudonym – a decision inspired, in part, to mask an appreciation for cinema (or *cinematógrafo*, as it was called in the early years) to which many chroniclers eventually owned up. The objections to the cinematograph made it a particularly dangerous spectacle for intellectuals who might have seen their credibility or prestige damaged by their association with the new technology. There was a moment of crisis, in

⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

fact, when at the very turn of the twentieth century, the first exhibitors of actualities programs in Mexico City saw their screening locations become unsafe places, and the morality of the films' contents increasingly come under attack from the Church and other conservative institutions. There was virtually no security or hygiene standards in the *jacalones*, (make-shift screening shacks), and the rather small number of films available "forced owners to present a musical variety show or improvisations by a small company of actors" to complement the films. These measures, often quickly thrown together, "contributed to inciting the audience's boisterous reactions."⁷⁵ Law enforcement and legislation had to intervene, giving the cinematograph an undesirable reputation that temporarily drove it out of the capital, leading burgeoning cinematograph impresarios to take the device on tour through the rest of country. Between 1899 and 1905, the cinematograph was, fittingly, an erratic ghost for urban chroniclers in Mexico City, as they found the number of *jacalones* dwindling dramatically. Not that all of them wanted those numbers up. It is telling that one of the few major chroniclers who tended to write under his own name, poet Luis G. Urbina, was also one of the most vocal critics of the new medium. And yet, those writers who learned to love the youngest manifestations of cinema and celebrated it behind pen names still found in their columns a place to build a larger-than-life, fictional persona that brought them closer to their readers and made them more compelling figures of a dialogue about their shared and particular experiences of modernity. As Mahieux puts it, the chronicle "paved the way for the self-fashioning of the contemporary chronicler as a mobile subject whose public status results from an agile balancing act between high culture and the urban popular."⁷⁶ Their celebrity, effectively a process of character creation, was an intimate part of their literary work,

⁷⁵ Manuel González Casanova, *Por la pantalla. Génesis de la crítica cinematográfica en México, 1917-1919* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2000), 22.

⁷⁶ Mahieux, *Urban Chroniclers*, 4.

and so it allowed them to tackle current events through thoughtful journalism that was imaginatively deployed.

2.2.2 *La Linterna Mágica* and the Emergence of Expression from Mimesis

As the optimal environment for the personal, the social and the literary to cross-pollinate at the rise of urban modernity, the chronicle also harmonized intriguingly with the developing history of film in Mexico. After its arrival in the country in 1896 by the hands of Lumière representatives Ferdinand Bon Bernard and Gabriel Veyre, the cinematograph quickly stood out for its documentary qualities. Manuel González Casanova attributes the initial desire to see in film, in Urbina's words, "fragment[s] of clear, sincere life, life without affectation, without pretense, without artifice"⁷⁷ partly to the "positivist philosophy that back in those days radiated from the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria* [the National Preparatory School] and onto the entire country."⁷⁸ The school, a public senior high school system attached to UNAM, the National University, had already been serving students for nearly thirty years before the cinematograph's invention and counted among its graduates many of the most prominent columnists, including Urbina himself. The intensely realist inclination of spectators, filmmakers and chroniclers can also be traced to the works of the most reputed writers of the decades preceding the birth of the cinematograph. González Casanova highlights novels of José Tomás de Cuéllar (1830-1894) as instances of highly influential *costumbrista* writing. *Costumbrismo* is relevant, first, for its determination to faithfully render daily life, in Cuéllar's own words, "not in the key of colossal or fantastic drama," but in his reader's present and surroundings: he "surprises" his characters "in their homes, in their families, in workshops, in the field, in jail, everywhere, catching some

⁷⁷ Quoted in González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

with laughter on their lips, and others with sorrow in their eyes.”⁷⁹ Cuéllar revealingly titled a series of his novels *La linterna mágica* (*The Magic Lantern*, 1889), and it would seem that title references pre-cinematic spectacles and ties them to a documentary impulse. However, the almost candidly photographic intent of his writings is more part of the “modern yearning for the actual” in development since the eighteenth century,⁸⁰ not to mention the positivist school to which Cuéllar also belonged. His magic lantern was meant to shine a light not on “Russian princesses or... European kings,” but on “what is ours”, that is, Mexican characters and figures.⁸¹ Casanova’s bridging of *costumbrista* fiction with the desire for realism in early film chronicles suggests that literary invention – the concoction of fantasies, albeit committed to veracity – contributed, paradoxically, to shaping a realist, documentary vocation. For novelist and screenwriter Mauricio Magdaleno, it is thanks to Cuéllar that “the document finally appears in Mexico,”⁸² just in time for chroniclers to take their pens to the cinematograph, and tackle film’s vivid picture of life from a perspective mixing poetry and reportage.

There is more to say about Cuéllar’s title. Critics have found in *costumbrismo* a middle ground between Romantic and Realist literatures, an area that José Escobar sketches from two metaphors borrowed from yet another title reminiscent of Cuéllar’s: M.H. Abrams *The Mirror and The Lamp*. The latter work theorizes a confrontation between the mimetic side (the mirror) and the expressive motivation (the lamp) of poetic fiction, the latter of which fueled Romantic literature.⁸³ Given its *costumbrista* objectives, Cuéllar’s own lamp, a magic lantern, appears to

⁷⁹ Quoted in the “Prologue,” by Mauricio Magdaleno, in José Tomás de Cuéllar, *La linterna mágica*, ed. Mauricio Magdaleno (Mexico City: UNAM, 1941), XI-XII.

⁸⁰ Robert Scholes, James Phelan, Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 257.

⁸¹ Quoted in Magdaleno, “Prologue,” XI.

⁸² *Ibid.*, XII.

⁸³ José Escobar, “Costumbrismo entre el Romanticismo y el Realismo” in *Sociedad de Literatura Española del Siglo XIX. Coloquio. Del Romanticismo al Realismo*, eds. Luis F. Díaz Larios and Enrique Miralles (Barcelona: Universitat, 1998), 27

be summoned in the service of mimesis rather than expression. Escobar distinguishes between mimesis as an idealist imitation of nature and “*costumbrista* mimesis,”⁸⁴ the portrait of bourgeois civil life. In its “faithful and prosaic” copy of society and the habits and costumes of the middle classes,⁸⁵ *costumbrismo* would seem to stand in opposition to the kind of visionary writing found in Romanticism and, therefore, antithetical to poetic investigation’s goal, as I have defined it, of study through creation. Yet there is an undeniable Romantic spirit to Cuéllar’s writings that make his fiction a robust predecessor to the chroniclers. First is the fact that, if a lamp is a metaphor for expressivity, it is so because of how it allows discovery rather than reproduction. Cuéllar hoped precisely to break the darkness, literarily speaking, in which his characters, in their familiarity, were often enshrouded. So his writings were as revealing as they were reflective. Second, the works in *La Linterna Mágica* were also expressing another idea that, in the 1880s, called for more solid articulation – the idea of a Mexican identity. “Those of us who try to give voice to our people’s feelings,” writes Magdaleno, “[must] recognize the honorable noise of the footsteps of those who preceded us in toiling to throw light on the confusion during a still nocturnal hour in this country. With [Cuéllar], Mexico was still facing many crossroads. Without his testimony, even the most rigorous mention of Mexico’s sentimental shock would be incomplete.”⁸⁶ At the height of the *Porfiriato*, during which an unequally beneficial path toward national stability after the *Reforma* struggle opened, the possibility of defining Mexico became a poetic, and therefore expressive, task.

The invention of Mexico entailed a third clue to Cuéllar’s romanticism, itself a result of the secularization of the Mexican state the liberals pursued during the *Reforma* war. At a greater

⁸⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁶ Magdaleno, “Prólogo,” XXI-XXII.

remove from clerical influence, some writers saw themselves as the new priests. For Monsiváis, Cuéllar

moralizes incessantly, since that is his duty (to write is to preach) and because at that time, it was assumed that readers received these sermons with gratitude. A writer of manners was expected to record the most notorious ways of life and reprimand them. By issuing these reprimands, they contributed to the code of permissible behavior in a society [that no longer relied as heavily] on the spiritual, on the promise of heaven and hell.⁸⁷

Héctor Pérez Martínez finds Cuéllar the romantic in Cuéllar the preacher. What betrays his romanticism is

that desire to repair [*componer*] the world and rule it through an immanent kindness, and the passion put in the service of virtue, and the irony with which contrasts are met; and the obsessive exhibition of incurable vices and even in what could be innocently called the novelist's technique. *La linterna mágica* moves in a single, constant direction: the exaltation of virtue. Every weapon will be called upon: anathema, examples, reflections, consequences.⁸⁸

Is this urge to *componer* – a word that means both “to fix” and “to compose” – the world not readily visible in passages like the following, from the *Baile y Cochino...* novel in *Linterna Mágica*, where methods to gather couples to attend a ball are described in loving detail, and three adjectives are necessary to give a full account of the nervous system? Cuéllar writes: “By enhancing the body’s circulation, hydrotherapy bestows on the nervous system – which is so delicate, so exquisite, and so obedient – a far from negligible amount of what can be called ‘the joy of living,’ creating an atmosphere in which half a dozen love-stricken youths feel as though they are on the true road to happiness.”⁸⁹ The foregoing points to the claim that a realist, mimetic, positivist literature ushered a form of film reflection that made of spectrality, fantasy and the mystery inherent in futurity the engine of a Romantic sense of creative expression. I

⁸⁷ Quoted in Margo Glantz, “Introduction” in José Tomás de Cuéllar. *The Magic Lantern*, ed. Margo Glantz, trans. Margaret Carson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), *xiii-xiv*.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Magdaleno, “Prólogo,” XX.

⁸⁹ Cuéllar, *The Magic Lantern*, 16.

argue that *costumbrismo*, which González Casanova selects as the immediate forbearer of the film chronicle's initial attitude toward the cinematograph's images, exudes a great deal of the desire for inventiveness that lies at the basis of poetic inquiry.

It is not necessary to dig too deeply into *costumbrismo*'s mimesis for traces of a visionary quality, for it would be cinema itself that would soon abandon its mimetic calling and take the chronicle with it in its emphasis on enchantment. The crumbling stability of the *Porfiriato* and the aforementioned yearning for the actual aided the emergence of a testimonial cinema as the first identifiable movement of film practice in Mexico – for Paranaguá, the first and true Golden Age of Mexican cinema.⁹⁰ The work of filmmakers like Salvador Toscano and Enrique Rosas in the first decade of the twentieth century, like their 1906 parallel films following President Porfirio Díaz's trip to the Southeastern city of Mérida, “reaffirmed the tendency toward... chronicling reality that characterized our national cinema.”⁹¹ Later, closer to and after the start of the Revolution in 1910, the Alva Brothers (Salvador, Guillermo, Eduardo and Carlos) took their cameras to the frontlines, producing the classics *Insurrección en México* (1911), *Revolución orozquista* (1912) and *Sangre hermana* (1913), films that showed the brothers' commitment to revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero. Although González Casanova refers to these films as “testimonial,” they were clearly propagandistic, glorifying first Madero and, in the latter two, the federal military in opposition to the forces in the North (Pascual Orozco's rebels) and in the South (Emiliano Zapata's army). But González Casanova calls the films “testimonial” to accentuate an interesting journalistic disconnect during the transition from a predominantly documentary cinema to the advent of the fiction film. There is surprise, but also recognition, when González Casanova observes that “despite the importance of testimonial cinema for us, as

⁹⁰ Paranaguá, “Ten Reasons to Love or Hate Mexican Cinema” in *Mexican Cinema*, 1.

⁹¹ González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 34.

it characterized Mexican film from 1896 to 1916, we know of no article of the period that analyzes it, or even comments upon it.”⁹² The omission is quite glaring for González Casanova, as the major column of film chronicles in those years, “*Por la pantalla*” (“*Across the Screen*”) made its preferences clear when it covered the release of both *Reconstrucción nacional*, “practically the last great testimonial film,” first shown in the city of Querétaro on March 13th of 1917, and *El automóvil gris* (1919), one of the first feature-length classics and a definitive step in the turn toward fiction cinema:

The very authors of “*Por la pantalla*,” [Hipólito] Seijas [pen name of playwright and chronicler Rafael Pérez Taylor] and [Silvestre] Bonnard [pen name of writer and filmmaker Carlos Noriega Hope] did not seem to take note of the importance of [testimonial cinema]; we have already said that the former barely mentions *Reconstrucción nacional* when he had the chance, and the latter, when writing about *El automóvil gris*... does not make even the slightest mention of it either. Without a doubt, a look at Mexican cinema’s history will show it is a cinema without memory. A cinema that is born every day.⁹³

The assertion that there are no articles that analyze or comment upon testimonial cinema is somewhat puzzling, since there do exist chronicles that mention, for example, the Alva Brothers’s propaganda films. An anonymous piece from the Mexico City daily *El Diario*, titled “*Una revelación cinematográfica*” (“A Cinematographic Revelation”) discusses *Revolución orozquista*:

The people of the Republic’s capital have been able to “live” the Northern revolution thanks to the development of a “film,” exhibited in a showroom. They have been in Chihuahua during the time when the rebels occupied the city; they have marched with Gral. Huerta’s forces and witnessed the battle of Bachimba. They are well “informed” and know what occurs on “this” and the “other” side of the “barracks.” And surely this graphic lesson provided them useful knowledge.⁹⁴

Perhaps González Casanova considers that the examples of these chronicles flesh out the events captured in testimonial cinema, never remarking on the mediation that weaves its images, even

⁹² Ibid., 54.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ *El Diario* (Wednesday, August 21st, 1912): 3.

when this mediation rather flagrantly imposes itself. But as is evident from the above excerpt, the chronicler attempts to describe the experience of watching the film by finding the right sequence of words and typography to capture the Alva Brothers' formal sophistication. First is the conflation of the camera's gaze with the viewer's (the people of the capital "live," march and witness the film's incidents), and the quotation marks distinguish between the actual places and their screen doubles, an unequivocal sign of awareness of film's role in the unfolding of the events. Then there is the structure of the chronicle, which begins with the occupation of the city of Chihuahua by Orozco's soldiers, goes on to the advance of Huerta's troops, and ends with the battle of Bachimba, where Orozco and Huerta's forces finally collided. The order reflects that of the Alvas's editing, which divides the film in those very sections, exploring each warring side before the two converge in the end through the intercutting of their images. Still, I read traces of a forward-thinking, future-oriented mentality in González Casanova's statements on Mexican cinema's lack of memory. As Mexican author Alfonso Reyes, who wrote film chronicles in Spain under the pseudonym "Fósforo," with fellow *émigré* Martín Luis Guzmán, for magazine *España's* cinematograph column "*Frente a la pantalla*" ("*Before the screen*"), once wrote in a brief essay on cinema's inspirations: "It must be finally said that we have greater faith in the future than in the present. Cinema has, in our eyes, all the flaws and excellences of a promise."⁹⁵ It was as if cinema was more compelling to chroniclers because of what it would become, not for what it was. Rather than thinking of the present of testimonial cinema, the chroniclers that wrote during the testimonial Golden Age saw the world of tomorrow brewing on the screen, and they did so, often explicitly, by seeing in the images a spectral emissary from a future that was opened and waiting to be invented. Reyes and Guzmán's predecessor in *Frente a la pantalla*, Federico de

⁹⁵ Quoted in Manuel González Casanova, *El cine que vio Fósforo: Alfonso Reyes y Martín Luis Guzmán* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2003), 138.

Onís, went a step further, when he greeted readers with a disclaimer: “Notes of a spectator interested in things, not because of what they are, but what they could be.”⁹⁶ The ghost-fueled futurological impulse, as we will see below, was rather healthy among chroniclers.

2.2.3 The Necrophile Sundays of Enrique Chávarri, Amado Nervo and José Juan

Tablada

Besides the facts that they all wrote film chronicles and were all Mexican, these three writers had three other things in common: they were all poets, they all wrote Sunday columns, and they all displayed in their pieces on the cinematograph an interest in death. González Casanova argues that Enrique Chávarri (?-1903), writing as *Juvenal* in the column “*Charla de los Domingos*” (“Sunday Chats”) for the publication *El Monitor Republicano* in 1896, imagines the communion of the cinematograph with the phonograph “to rather necrophiliac ends.”⁹⁷ The following chronicle makes that exceedingly clear, evoking, not without humor, a world that ghosts like Faustine and the vampire populate:

Imagine, if you will, the day when the cinematograph and the phonograph can be united... the dead come back to life, evoked as if in a séance, summoned back from eternity in order to be forced to speak, to move, to live again, these dead who must be quite comfortable in the country of specters.

Everyone can record their dearly departed on photographic film, and from there throw them onto the white screen by way of the magic lantern to see them animated, while the phonograph speaks with the same voice of those who once were.

Those who’ve had a fierce mother-in-law will not cease taking comfort in making her dance a bolero, only to plunge her back into darkness, just like fatality drops those who point fingers into the abyss.

There is no doubt the world moves forward; we are on our way towards immortality, we are now able to keep the memory of our loved ones, not in inert statues, but in intangible, speaking, moving shadows that look and smile at us and threaten – oh God! – to leave the

⁹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 345.

⁹⁷ González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 17.

canvas on which they are drawn to embrace us, the supreme embrace in which the specter leaves eternity's halo around us.⁹⁸

González Casanova points out that Chávarri's vision, in which silent film images acquire corporeality and a voice, recreates the device at the center of Jules Verne's 1893 novel *Le Château des Carpathes*,⁹⁹ a precedent for Quiroga and Bioy Casares's specters: once more, a woman's image and voice are recorded and projected – in this case, those of an Italian prima donna, in an effort of a man besotted with the singer to preserve a shadow of her life. Like he did with Cuéllar's *costumbrista* novels, González Casanova continues to tie the practice of chronicling with the literary imagination, in this case one that speculates about future eschatological practices, with film as a new sort of mummification. Amado Nervo (1870-1919), a modernist poet, continues this trend while also writing about the technological pairing of image and sound, in the undated chronicle “*Un admirable sincronismo*” (“An Admirable Synchronicity”), which gushes about witnessing a cinematograph and a German gramophone working in unison, thanks to a device “invented by a lady from Berlin:”

All of us who for a few years have attended the cinematograph's successes have wondered: when could this admirable device be fused with an even more admirable one: the phonograph? And we have also imagined what would happen then. The history of the world depicted – finally! – just as it is and not as men have confected and spiced it...

Well, then: the devices are now conjoined, and the other night, in Madrid, I was able to attend some impeccably executed experiments...

At the same time that theatrical scenes were recorded on film, the actor or actors' voices were printed on the discs, and each film and its corresponding disc are synchronized later by means of a simple electrical wire and an ingenious regulating apparatus.

The gramophone and the cinematograph running in the same instant, which is easily accomplished; but if they are not synchronized because of a few second's delay, if we hear the voice before or after we see the respective lip movement that articulates it, the regulator fixes everything, playing either the disc or the film faster until the match is perfect.

⁹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Since the cinematograph and the phonograph are both excellent, and the latter is perfectly concealed behind the screen... [and], finally, since the people on screen are life-size, the illusion is complete ...

We listen *with our eyes* as well as our ears...

A disc and a tape of made of fragile stuff that is nonetheless impervious to time itself have been enough to keep, like bronze statues remain for the future, our physiognomy our attitude, our words, and our events.

Man is now immortal, thanks to the synchronicity of two familiar devices. Death has been vanquished!

We will continue to see and hear our loved ones, and our idols, and it will be as if they had never left us!

That the ghost moves and speaks thanks to the spell of a tape and a disc, or that it moves and speaks thanks to that other spell of storing energy inside a body, and which constitutes life... what does it matter?¹⁰⁰

Beyond the abundant sprinkling of exclamation marks, Nervo is perhaps the most extreme in his predictions, foretelling, rather enthusiastically, the eventual disappearance of the book under the dominion of the moving image, stretching his necrophilia into numerous odes to film's archival prowess and its incalculable value for teaching history "just as it is." What might sound like a positivist celebration of testimony, a congruent response to the cinema of the period, reads also like a passionate abandonment of rationality or, at the very least, as a willfully naive approach to the cinematograph's development. With his glib "what does it matter?" Nervo eliminates the importance of the technology itself, favoring its affective consequences over its practical considerations. Nervo, who traveled to Europe as a correspondent for the daily *El Imparcial*, elaborates, like some of his contemporaries, on the many uses that film could have, approaching science fiction rather than testament and preferring divination over portraiture, fantasy over actuality.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Felipe Garrido, *Luz y sombra: los inicios del cine en la prensa de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997), 122-123.

Between Chávarri's irony and Nervo's exhilaration, poet José Juan Tablada (1871-1945) presents a lucid account of a necrophilia that is both rational and delusional, describing, in a pair of chronicles that bookend the age of testimonial film, how the realism throbbing in cinema's heart (and it is, by now, "cinema," with many writers speaking about the spawn of various separate devices) encouraged an enchantment with the real and an insistent awareness of its mutability. The first, published in *El Universal* on December 12th, 1896, in his Sunday column "Domingales" (which, curiously, was published on a Saturday in that occasion), follows Chávarri's own chronicle closely, but begins with an acknowledgement of a strange quality of the images on the screen: "The first feeling this spectacle elicits is one of superstition and fanaticism... And even though after some reflection the physical laws that rule this device surprise us, the superstitious illusion persists, making one feel as if enveloped and lost in an atmosphere of mystery and dream."¹⁰¹ One must remark upon the word "surprises" (*sorprenda*) in the above fragment. It attempts to convey a furtive realization of the elegant science that makes moving images possible, as if the viewer, while "enveloped in an atmosphere of mystery and dream," snuck up, every so often, on the very technical, logical principles underpinning the show (or, quite possibly, that these principles actually sneak up on the viewer). But those feelings quickly give way to an "emotive witnessing,"¹⁰² and once again, Tablada, like Nervo and Chávarri, couches the archival power of cinema in the marriage of the cinematograph and the phonograph:

And how not to think of the comforts that this illusion can spill over the numerous pains of the loss of a loved one, who is given back to world through this device, resurrected, ripped off the hands of oblivion and death and living with the energetic and eloquent life of movement and expression... A dream within the reach of a hero [*prócer*] who, rather than owning a photographic album in which the images turn pale like corpses in their caskets, would have a cinematograph, and whenever he wished to journey through the

¹⁰¹ Quoted in González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 18.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 19.

past and submerge himself in memory's depths, he would contemplate the tentative walk of the departed mother, the gentle movements of the dead bride, all while a phonograph spills in his ear the blessed accent of maternal words and the passionate rhythm of love's promises!¹⁰³

I want to dwell on how these three writers' necrophilia leads them to envisage, and rhapsodize about, the combination of the cinematograph and the phonograph. More significantly, they place enormous stress on the centrality of sound for film to fulfill its commitment to posterity, its mission of weaving ghosts for the future (this is even applicable to the Baron Rodolphe de Gortz, Jules Verne's character in *Le Château des Carpathes*, whose illusion of the ghost of an opera singer hinges on the capturing of her voice). They thus join a Western history – artistic, literary and scholastic – coupling sound with specters. At times, that history rather involved their uncoupling: Quiroga himself, in his role of chronicler, decried the coming of sound, admonishing, in one of his final chronicles (March 14th, 1929) that “specters should not speak, whether in reality or on screen. Silence is part of their essence.”¹⁰⁴ In part, it is clear Quiroga objected to the still new technology's imperfections. He complained about the crackling noises coming from the speakers, a failure of concealment that only distracted him further from watching expression itself rather than ideas emerging from words. An outspoken believer in scientific and technological progress, Quiroga saw in the sound film's ability to endow its human figures with speech an affront against what he believed was cinema's *raison d'être* – its focus on gesture and body language. Unlike Chávarri, Nervo and Tablada, Quiroga's ghosts do not need their voices in order to attain spectral status. As far as he was concerned, the shadows on the screen were already phantoms, and he balked at the intrusion of their voices on artistic grounds.

Further distancing the ghost from the aural plane, Friedrich Kittler's media-archeological work creates homologies between several devices and the three Lacanian orders to argue how

¹⁰³ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Quiroga, *Arte y lenguaje del cine*, 366.

media have shaped processes of self-formation. For Kittler, cinema is in fact the territory of ghosts. Interestingly, however, it belongs, in his estimation, to the realm of the Imaginary, because it creates a flow of images. The gramophone, in its recording of the gibberish of the unconscious, is directly associated with the Real. Sound is even further removed from the materialization and definition that film's phantasm developed, the latter creating an idealized vision belying the fragmentation of both the image and the self. "Thus, the imaginary has the status of cinema." Phonography, on the other hand, can be about recording "all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order or linguistic meaning," or the pre-verbal, real intonations of an organism's life.¹⁰⁵ But the communion of these machines and its resulting complexities are not part of Kittler's observations, which are largely based on the *sight* of the body in film, as it is cut up and then reassembled with extraordinary fluidity. He, like Quiroga, separates the ghost from sound, not to mount an aesthetic counterargument, but to trace the correlations between media technology changes and intra-psychic phenomena.

But Chávarri, Nervo, Tablada, Peretz and Link tell a different story, one that Nervo might have anticipated with his synesthetic claim that, in the synchronicity of the cinematograph and the phonograph, the viewer "hears with her eyes as well as her ears." Peretz precisely zeroes on sound, and the film *Blow Out*'s clever treatment of it, to continue his delineation of the ghostly dimension of the frame. One could say that, in its appropriation and reconfiguration of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), from a film about a photographer to a film about a sound recordist, *Blow Out* is about the enigma of film sound more than it is about the visual image. Peretz treats it as such, discussing the very first frames of the film, which are all black. Instead of images, they carry the sound of a heartbeat, the source of which remains unseen. "A primordial anxiety

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16.

arises,” Peretz says, “an anxiety of the *unlocatability*, the *non-identification* of the heartbeat.” The impossibility to see the origins of the sound is what makes it a messenger from the beyond and, thus, a ghost: “For the auditory beat is, precisely, unlocatable, has no assignable place, is not an identifiable object, and belongs to no one and, as such, is immediately constituted as anxious haunting, that is, as the restlessness of that which has no place.”¹⁰⁶ The phantom-like Other of the image can thus be also summoned through sound.

Even more precisely, it can be argued that sound is the original element that created a haunting disjunction between the senses in the moving image. In other words, cinema first perpetrated the technological fragmentation of the body that the limits of the frame, and the inability to locate the sources of its sounds, link to the absolute outside of perception, the enigma that demands imaginative, visionary responses. The clearest emergence of the enigma at the heart of the senses – the immanent outside – lies in the ways the sound-image synchronicity breaks down, when the perceptual evidence cannot make one stimulus match the other. It is just such an asynchrony that kick-starts *Blow Out*’s plot: soundman Jack Terry (John Travolta) laughs when, while watching the cut of a sequence of the slasher film on which he is working (parodically titled *Co-ed Frenzy*), one of the actresses screams at the sight of a knife-wielding maniac stalking her while she showers. “The scream is terrible,” he exclaims, simultaneously signaling the mismatching of sound and image and the audience’s realization that what they have been watching up to that point was a film within the film, one that is in the middle of production. The anxiety aroused by the unlocatable heartbeat returns here. The scream represents another haunting sound we cannot locate and master because it doesn’t really seem to come from the woman we do see. De Palma’s *coup de théâtre* lies in the fact that this is not a sound-image asynchrony at all: that is actually the actress’s voice, and her real scream, actually recorded *in*

¹⁰⁶ Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 87 (his emphasis).

situ, does appear to be off, as if it didn't really belong to the woman we are watching. Peretz underlines the importance of the event:

Though it is indeed the actress' voice recorded on the soundtrack... it somehow *does not fit* in the very mouth that uttered it, and by not fitting, somehow fails to satisfy something we desire, something supposed to happen in between the opening of the mouth and our, and Terry's, ear. It is as if what we have been waiting for, that would have assured our complete liberation from the phantom haunting us since the film's opening, doesn't happen, and the dimension of haunting is opened up again very forcefully, in the gap between this strange and menacing opening in the organic body that is the mouth and the no less strange opening with no organic mechanism for closing that is the ear. It is as if only the right scream, when *made to fit* in the open mouth of the naked girl whose image we master, can close our mouth and ears (and eyes, and heart) and exorcise the phantom discovered in their openness (to the absolute outside).¹⁰⁷

For Peretz, it is precisely the indecipherable noises from the larynx Kittler understood as utterances from the non-phantasmatic, non-imagistic Real – represented by that most primordial of utterances, the scream – that become haunting specters. For “if it is the scream that we want to make fit, more than anything else, into a mouth that we can master, that would seem to indicate that the scream is somehow that which is most unmasterable, that most resists fitting in, or having a place. The scream seems to be the utmost occurrence of placelessness and painful haunting.”¹⁰⁸ In its technological recording of sounds and images, film becomes an ideal medium to realize the gaps between the senses that perceive them, and notions like the fact that each sense, itself a kind of frame, has a horizon that ends where the others begin – the picture of the actress Terry sees is not enough, and a sound must complete it. The senses ghost one another, each a mystery to the other. Grasping that fundamental disconnection is grasping the shadow haunting every sensual tie to the world, and a first attempt at trying to make sense of that shadow with a visionary expansion of the senses, an increase in intuition and inspiration to fill the gaps. Kittler proposes cinema gives the illusion of the completeness of the self. Peretz explains why

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

film does not provide such deceptions, and why Nervo's sense that cinema scrambles the limits between the senses was both an astute and even prophetic insight.

Further echoing the chroniclers' impression that sound would fulfill cinema's spectrality, and pointing out the bounds of Kittler's Lacanian homologies, Link's work associates ghosts with sound and the voice. Link writes from the Latin American tradition, and does so in a way that acknowledges how it exists both within and without Western culture. He revises Odysseus's encounter with the sirens in *The Odyssey* and defines its legacy as one of rejection of the imaginary, not in the Lacanian sense, but in a visionary conception in line with De Palma, Peretz and the chroniclers' desire to glimpse an untold future. Link critiques Odysseus's gambit of surviving the sirens' fatal chorus for its arrogant desire to dominate, to master his people and his environment through a literal silencing (a closing of his body, another denial of its natural openness) of an otherworldly sound. The sirens' voices are heralds of an alternative to Odysseus' own world, which has room only for that which it can define, understand, or bring into one of its regimes of knowledge. Link's reading argues that the sirens refuse such treatment:

But the sirens are neither natural nor social. What's more, the sirens' song comes from a beyond that is inconvenient to completely identify with "the Imaginary." They are neither in the Real (the Natural), nor in the Imaginary (the narcissistic delusions of identification) nor in the Symbolic (the social structure understood as a classifying system or an interpellation device): they are monsters. The normalizing and classifying modernity (a *Ghostbuster* modernity, one might say) could not cheerfully deal with the "in-between-places" of the imaginary, so it proceeded to block or depopulate its nest of ghosts.¹⁰⁹

In their monstrosity, the sirens sing ghosts: their voices are haunting, placeless specters. By mechanically making voices and images fit together, the cinematic image unfolds with the implication that they may not fit together, that they might not belong where they are found and are, therefore, placeless like the sirens' voices. Rather than erase their in-betweenness, film can highlight it, and when it appears, Link argues, Odysseus's refusal and desire for control might

¹⁰⁹ Link, *Fantasmas*, 26.

not be the only response: “The siren song is pure ‘calling,’ the ‘pleasant void of listening,’ the indifference between interior and exterior, between being and nothingness, between reference and story, between belief and desire, between flight and imprisonment: a threshold of seduction, never a limit of understanding.”¹¹⁰ By pragmatically thinking of the siren song as a problem to be solved and conquered, and acting upon those assumptions, Odysseus fails to listen and embrace the monsters’ seductive potential. His “victory,” and the resulting notion that “the hero can triumph over the monsters’ seduction,” are therefore illusory. Because it is a placeless voice, it is the seduction of nothingness and, thus, of death, but it is also a relationship “beyond thought or even another form of thought. It escapes the limits of culture (those limits that, we know, are madness and science).”¹¹¹ Link and Peretz’s projects align here, in that they both arrive in their arguments to a haunting no-place that requires another conception of thinking in order to access it in search of new lives and times. Link calls it “the literary imagination,” and it is its release from Odyssean practicality that he is after:

Of all the aesthetic categories necessary for an adequate description of twentieth century aesthetic movements, imagination is the one that (save for Blanchot) has received the least attention. There are many theories of perception, experience [and] representation associated with last century’s literary production; but it remains more or less in mystery (or in deliberate romantic confusion) what to make of the *literary imagination*. A similar theoretical poverty represents a paradox in relation to a period that precisely made of imagination one of its defining signs. A paradox or an enigma: where does this hatred come from, and what does it involve – that hatred of the imaginary that led into either theories and positions that pursued its cancellation... or theories and positions that forbade themselves to call it by name... even though it was the imaginary and its figures that they talked about the entire time?¹¹²

A theorist that Link calls out from the latter group is Deleuze. Peretz’s visionary senses, an evolution from Deleuze’s ideas, could be a step in Link’s direction, which begins theorizing imagination by articulating the spectrality of sound and the voice. It was, perhaps, that spectrality

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹¹² Ibid., 39.

to which early film chroniclers in Latin America were responding, and which led them to intuit in cinema a device fundamentally tied to the workings of the imagination, literary or otherwise. They reacted, with their poetry and fiction, to cinema's revelation of the haunting beyond the edges of perception through its electrolysis of image and sound.

There is another aspect of Nervo, Chávarri and Tablada's poetic reunion of spectrality and the sound image I am yet to tackle in depth, one that Link mentions frequently: its relationship to death. Its centrality represents a way to sketch the cultural motivations behind the Mexican chroniclers' necrophilia. González Casanova himself cannot resist suggesting his countrymen's attitudes are tied to "a deeply-rooted cultural tradition in our country."¹¹³ He does so, however, without pushing further, possibly aware that this spectral inspiration might not appear solely, or even mainly, in Mexican ideologies of death. Still, it is worth detailing the relationship of the necrophilia in early film chronicles with Mexican death traditions, since a large part of the Mexican identity has been built around a unique position towards death, one that has been variously described, analyzed, championed and critiqued. Claudio Lomnitz goes as far as calling Death "Mexico's national totem," a status for which he credits the country's post-colonial and post-imperial condition and the ensuing proximity to, even intimacy with, the end of life. In words that remind us of Link's description of the sirens' ghostly songs, their in-betweenness and their dismantling of inside-outside relationships, Lomnitz tries to give further reasons for the longevity of Mexico's bond with death:

Indeed, what is perhaps most intriguing about Mexico as a modern nation is that it has defined itself as a nation of enemies. Enemies who procreate. Enemies who recognize that they cannot entirely eliminate each other. Foreign wars that fracture the national public rather than unify it. Creoles who fear being cast as foreign Europeans; Indians who constantly face exclusion. The nation's official protagonist, the *mestizo*, is represented as issuing from rape. In addition to these broad conflicts in the very idea of the national community, the weakness of the Mexican state has meant that justice has often been

¹¹³ González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 17.

delivered through informal channels. A nation with a traditionally high homicide rate and a traditionally inefficient prison system, Mexico's colonial and dependent heritage has made it difficult to draw a sharp line between the nation and its enemies, between inside and outside, between the dead who must be named and honored and those who are to remain unaccounted and anonymous, in unmarked graves. As a result, death in Mexico gets a very different rap.¹¹⁴

Lomnitz attempts to capture that rap by comparing it to how death seems to fare in other countries and regions. If Europe and the United States were territories where death is denied, Russia sublimated suffering through "a romantic sense of tragedy," and Imperial Japan tied the glory of fearlessness in the face of death to militarism, Mexico erected "a gay familiarity with death as the cornerstone of national identity." For Lomnitz, "the nationalization of an ironic intimacy with death is a singularly Mexican strategy." That intimacy is "nihilistic, light-hearted" and "medieval" in the sense that "death makes a mockery of us all."¹¹⁵

Perhaps the most potent effect of Mexico's jocular adoption of death, and its clearest pathway to the necrophilia of film chronicles, is Lomnitz's claim that the darkly humorous acceptance of death informs Mexican culture's problematic sense of collectivity: "Indeed, Mexico is one of those countries that have had to recognize the serious limitations to concerted collective action. It was this awareness of an only very tenuously shared sense of a *future* that led intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century to elevate Death to the status of a *national sign*."¹¹⁶ In that light, Mexican culture seems increasingly like the ideal place for a ghostly understanding of the moving image to take root. Yet if mid-twentieth century thinkers drafted Death to stand for the uncertainty of futurity, film chroniclers of the 1890s and 1900s were precisely enthused about how cinema could tune viewers into the times to come with higher fidelity. For them, rather than deny the existence of a future, the proximity to death cinema made possible actually

¹¹⁴ Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 20.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

ensures a future and confirms it as an open time waiting to be imagined. Lomnitz cautions the reader that “[t]he recognition of *contradictory attitudes* toward, and even *impersonal interests* in, death is a first and necessary step for the formulation of a new program of research.”¹¹⁷ It is this recognition that Peretz expresses when he describes what is behind the wish to make the unlocatable scream fit into a body through cinema in *Blow Out*, and that he also couples explicitly with death:

It is as if by this making the placeless fit, a paradoxical making of a place for that which is not the order of the place, that we can achieve the paradoxical desire to mastering our own unmasterable dimension, but *as* unmasterable. That is, the unmasterable is not simply that which we want to overcome but, rather, that which we desire to remain intact as unmasterable, yet in our possession, as if we wanted to live death, be present at our own funeral, see the night in the day.¹¹⁸

For Nervo, Chávarri and Tablada, that night was not an inevitable end, but an irrevocable seduction of inspiration. What they do when they write about the future of the sound film is not media divination, but the game of the literary imagination to which cinema’s singularly fragmented, immaterial composition appealed. Neither ironic, nihilistic eschatology nor positivist optimism, the poetization of the spectrality of cinema in these writings is instead a realization of the necessity to humbly contend with the body and the world’s immanent enigmatic dimension in its own terms, terms that forever resist definition but that insist on our openness to change. It is a theory of film that conceives it as a vehicle for our embodied thought to resonate with mystery, and thus with one another. If in Mexico enemies and friends are difficult to distinguish, it is perhaps easier to find a more robust, less tenuous vision of a shared future in a spectral world everyone carries within them. Cinema is the ghost that reminded audiences of their common haunting and made it more immediately available.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁸ Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 112-113.

2.2.4 The Phantom Herself: the Chronicles of Cube Bonifant

My brief metahistory of the ghost's role as muse had its brightest star in the figure of Cube Bonifant, "Mexico's most popular film chronicler."¹¹⁹ In her journalistic career and public life, Bonifant came to represent the trends and outlooks so far delineated while ushering them to intriguing new depths. For Jorge Ayala Blanco, arguably Mexico's current most popular film critic – and about whom an entire chapter will follow below – she is the first writer to set plausible foundations for a cinematic culture in Mexican letters,¹²⁰ a writer who massaged the effusive wonderment of her predecessors and contemporaries into a more focused advocacy for a thoughtful national film production, an equally alert critical response, and an openness to caustic humor. In the process, she made of the chronicle the genre of her literary career, turning it into her mode of creative expression; she spoke extensively about possible futures for Mexican cinema; she argued powerfully for the relevance of cinema as an art form. Most extraordinarily, she was perhaps the only chronicler to successfully give herself fully to cinema, becoming a ghost herself and fulfilling the destinies of Quiroga's Rosales and Bioy Casares's Fugitive. It can be argued that Bonifant became both Faustine and the Fugitive, a woman who wrote angry love letters to the film image and was a film image herself. Her multimedia, larger-than-life existence, coupled with her writing, make her a character who illustrates and symbolizes the spectral vocation of poetic investigation.

I am not speaking metaphorically: Bonifant, unlike any of the writers above, had a brief foray as a film actress that would be intimately attached to her prolific, over-three-decades-long journalistic career. Born in 1904 in the state of Sinaloa in Northwest Mexico, with the real name of Antonia Bonifant López, she was the youngest of three daughters of a French mining engineer

¹¹⁹ Alfonso Medina, "Seis años de anécdotas del Ilustrado" in *El Ilustrado* (May 17th, 1934): 17, 38.

¹²⁰ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Era, 1979), 292.

who sent her family away from the violence of the Revolution. She would arrive in Mexico City in 1920, with her mother and sisters and in need of a job (his father seems to never have made it to the capital). The Bonifant sisters tended toward artistic pursuits: her sister Carmen, “famous for her light, panther-like eyes,” found some success as an actress for the stage and silent cinema. Viviane Mahieux speculates that it was probably through Carmen that Bonifant met Carlos Noriega Hope, “a young cinephile with round spectacles and a thin mustache” who directed the popular magazine *El Universal Ilustrado*.¹²¹ He was also, as seen above, an avid film chronicler under the pen name Silvestre Bonnard. Eventually, Noriega Hope requested Bonifant’s participation in two of his projects: the *Ilustrado* itself, and his film *La gran noticia* (1923), an ambitious work about journalism in Mexico City (one that, sadly, is now considered lost). Starring actual journalists from *El Universal*, *La gran noticia* did not receive rapturous acclaim or sizable revenues, but it succeeded in making Bonifant’s face familiar enough so that her column, which featured her photograph under her name, enjoyed a growing readership, adding followers to those who had first been taken by her irrepressible wit and nimble prose. The latter two, of course, are primarily responsible for her achievement, which went far beyond film criticism. But the fact is the star quality of her on-screen presence aided to her aura of celebrity, one that mated with her sharp vision and literary aspirations. She only needed one major role in the cinema to attain that level of exposure. Her brief acting stint did not ensure her journalistic/literary career – it only allowed her to populate the readership’s attention in other ways.

Indeed, her writing made a mark for how it alchemically cultivated *crónicas* that were entertaining, informative and speculative in equal measure while also demanding to be read

¹²¹ Viviane Mahieux, “Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade en la crónica mexicana” in Cube Bonifant, *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade: crónicas selectas (1921-1948)*, ed. Viviane Mahieux (Mexico City: UNAM, 2009), 43.

through the assimilation of the cityscape's sensual emissions. Bonifant's work permeated the public consciousness on a level beyond the absorption of her words – it also pulsed in remarkable harmony with her audience's experience of modern media. That she had starred in an event film disseminated her persona into the fabric of urban attractions that became one of the common denominators of collective experience for city dwellers. Her celebrity helped turn her into an emissary from that rarefied, phantomlike world that reported through a form of writing predicated in its closeness to its readers. Her own take on acting for the cinema, upon which she expanded in a chronicle, has a self-deprecating charm that makes her sound simultaneously sophisticated and down-to-earth: "it is not worth spoiling one's skin with all that make-up," she once wrote about one of the reasons to leave the movie business.¹²² She was both glamorous and approachable, an idol well within reach of her admirers. The many pennames she adopted and the different aspects she covered in her chronicles also endowed her with the right amount of elusiveness: she wrote on film as "Luz Alba," (Dawn Light), about celebrities as "Aura Stella," and signed many of her pieces with the playful "QB" (which spells her name phonetically in Spanish). Mahieux observed that while Bonifant did not become a working film actor – largely by choice, it must be added – she certainly had a knack for performance she would display unmistakably elsewhere: "No matter how much she protested against acting, Bonifant knew how to transfer it into writing, converting her column into the stage of her own weekly reinvention."¹²³ Soon she evolved into an ungraspable, yet proximate, figure of almost romantic longing.

The ability to maintain such a dichotomy meant she managed to embody her time by mixing seduction and rationality, as if her jaunt through the screen, and her transformation into a

¹²² Quoted in *ibid.*, 17.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

cinematic shadow, had added to her lucid writing a strong trace of the sense of wonder and curiosity of earlier and contemporary chroniclers. But there were other contrasts Bonifant's writing reconciled. She set her weariness of modernity squarely in a positivist industrial context and she appealed to a contemporary femininity that associates her with Bioy Casares's Faustine – with women that inspired desire – but that makes her own choices, completing the idea of an autonomous projection more in line with Quiroga's vampire. Mahieux put it best:

If Bonifant recovered a decadentist style that was out of step with the revolutionary era's renovating zeal, she would do so by popularizing it within a growing industrial journalism. At the end of the nineteenth century, *La Revista Moderna* had already turned to the "decadent woman" model – the androgynous, cruel nymphomaniac that represented all of society's ills – to critique a *porfiriana* bourgeoisie that the magazine simultaneously seduced with its luxurious pages and literary elitism. In Bonifant's case, it is the decadent woman who stops being a muse and starts speaking for herself, bringing together within a single attitude two opposing imaginaries. On the one hand, she is the curious girl who cheekily discovers her potential in the cultured city, giving voice to the youth of a new era. On the other, she is the bored, exhausted woman who's not impressed by anything or anyone. Besides her writing, the images that accompanied her column fed this duality. For instance, there is a sketch of her as a flirtatious, sensual schoolgirl smiling bashfully under the enormous ribbon adorning her flapper bob, juxtaposed with the photograph of a serious Bonifant framed by two cats, which give her a feline, dangerous appearance.¹²⁴

The above passage's emphasis on her images, and the contradictions they brought to life in conjunction with her writing, suggests Bonifant was a star in the way Edgar Morin once articulated in his landmark *The Stars* (1960) – by which I mean, she was, in important ways, a film star, even after she abandoned the screen for the pages of weekly magazines. Morin argues that despite the presence of figures around which a widespread cult could develop, such as stage actors, before the advent of the cinematograph, "[t]he movies have invented and revealed the star."¹²⁵ Bonifant's stardom owes more to her writing than to her screen career, to be sure, but it is also true that it enjoyed a certain hybridity that had more of a hint of the cinematic. Cinema

¹²⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹²⁵ Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Grove, 1960), 8.

not only aided her popularity – it defined its quality. When Mahieux observes that “Bonifant clearly deployed her reading interests to cultivate her image,”¹²⁶ the latter term could also be taken literally. Her writing preserved the radiance of her screen presence, which the discourse around movie stardom has often described as a magical, almost supernatural attribute – that it comes, in other words, from a spectral realm. Morin speaks of stars as “[d]ivinized” beings around which “a religion in embryo has formed.”¹²⁷ If her photograph is the ghost on the page of her column, her writing further helped build a phantomlike, cinematic stardom. Rather than merely a famous writer, Bonifant acquired a spectral aura closer to that of film stars than of literary luminaries.

That aura is quickly elicited in one of her earliest published chronicles, in which she introduces herself to her readers as “a little Marquise de Sade.” It is clear she intends to compare herself to the Marquis De Sade himself, Donatien Alphonse François, and not with his wife Renée-Pélagie de Montreuil, who took on the title of Marquise after her marriage to de Sade. Having associated herself, through the moniker, with a figure that brings to mind both an iconoclastic intellect and extreme cruelty, Bonifant goes on to contend with the expectations that her femininity might impose on her so that there are no confusions: “Do I like flowers and children? Flowers... yes, but only to pluck and eat their petals. Children inspire in me a deep discomfort; I feel the need to claw them with my sharp nails.”¹²⁸ Speaking of a very specific child she saw at a party she attended, where she heard the boy’s father lovingly praise his son’s eyes, Bonifant confesses that she “shivered in voluptuous anticipation when I had a discreetly

¹²⁶ Mahieux, “Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade,” 22.

¹²⁷ Morin, *The Stars*, 71.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Mahieux, “Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade,” 20.

wicked thought: to gouge the boy's eyes out."¹²⁹ Right at the start of her career, she cast herself as seductively monstrous, as more than human.

Her construction of the image of a curious-yet-decadent flapper that imbued her chronicles with a screen-like, near-supernatural presence was not only meant to hook her readers and affirm her inhabitation of a "heterogeneous cultural modernity,"¹³⁰ or to demonstrate her ability to speak of the urban milieu she shared with her readers. When she turned to writing about film (which she would do exclusively from the mid-thirties to the end of her journalistic career in the late forties), she was looking to establish her identity as a writer in a much larger arena than the columns in which she got her start. "The importance Bonifant ascribed to the art of cinema was also part of the process to make a name for herself in literature outside explicit gender barriers."¹³¹ The weekly women's chronicle as a genre demanded the writer produce work that constantly transformed and evolved to keep the readership coming back, and Bonifant more than met that requirement. For Mahieux, however, that very talent is what held her back in becoming a canonical figure in Mexican letters: "the chronicle called for constant, surprising reinvention and for Bonifant to remain at the vanguard of current events without giving her the opportunity to build a consistent rhetoric through which to open a lasting dialogue with the literary and intellectual world."¹³² In that light, she succeeded, at the very least, in breaking out of the "women's column" ghetto to which she was immediately and unquestioningly assigned. The changes in the titles of her columns attest to that success, going from "*El cine visto por una mujer*" ("Cinema as Seen by a Woman") to "*Crítica cinematográfica de los últimos estrenos*"

¹²⁹ Cube Bonifant, "Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade para un Oscar Wilde pequeño" in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 60.

¹³⁰ Mahieux, "Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade," 22.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 45.

(“Film Reviews of the Latest Releases”). Yet the genre in which she thrived might have prevented her from reaching a more central place in the Mexican literary sphere.

Reading her film chronicles, however, reveals that steps toward precisely that consistent rhetoric do in fact take recognizable, if not definitive, shape. A transition takes place throughout her writings, which, at first, appears to be a genre shift from the chronicle to criticism, with analytical and evaluative intents taking precedence over the varied musings that made her reputation. That is not to say that the transition was perfect or complete, or that her search for a critical discourse was chiefly dedicated to reproducibility and repetition. Her work is actually illustrative of some of the assumptions surrounding the birth of film criticism and its inventive aspects. Is Mahieux correct when she claims that Bonifant needed a “consistent rhetoric” to be taken seriously in intellectual circles? Do those circles not appreciate constant reinvention, and if not, why? What Mahieux brings up are certain expectations when it comes to criticism – that to be called “criticism,” the writing must be representative of a process of construction of a sturdy, lasting verbal apparatus to which writers and readers can turn to define quality and achievement. So after a period of invention, the hope is that the more persuasive, seemingly accurate terms will settle and reverberate through subsequent pieces of writing.

Alongside eventual consistency, there is an assumption of innovation. While the invention of words might be expected at the dawn of a form of expression in a new medium, that search is always already in the middle of past and current critical vocabularies. The inception of film criticism, one could assume, involved both a recognition of novelty and a coming-to-terms with existing discourses. Yet there are numerous declarations that film criticism came to be through a particular strategy: deeming the medium an unequivocally new art form. Writing in 1937, Alistair Cooke says that early British film critics were presented with a unique chance to

discover a new kind of writing, because they were free "to define the movies with no more misgivings than Aristotle defined tragedy."¹³³ Cinema was, in that view, "unencumbered by tradition."¹³⁴ Speaking of the pioneering work of Alfonso Reyes (the aforementioned *Fósforo*), González Casanova locates the same perception: "*Fósforo* justified his task [writing criticism] by recognizing the cinematograph as a 'new art.'"¹³⁵ *Fósforo* then demanded a clean break. "These days, journalistic impressions about cinema become – with the rarest exceptions – sentimental little speeches that feel right at home in film dramas." The "sentimental little speeches" came in the form of *crónicas*, which could only resort to "recounting the film," for they "had nothing else to say."¹³⁶ Casanova agrees: "Insofar as it had no language, cinema could not be an art, and if there was no art, it was impossible to have criticism, if we understand the term as an analysis of the creative elements of the work under discussion. There could only be chronicles of the spectacle of the cinematograph, which could of course be critical, but only of the spectacle in general, not of the work in particular."¹³⁷ So Reyes-as-*Fósforo* concludes "[l]et us then rehearse a new interpretation of cinema,"¹³⁸ which Casanova considers a call to "abandon the film chronicle and start writing film criticism."¹³⁹

Critics themselves were the first to (perhaps inadvertently) dispel the fallacy of complete novelty, most visibly in how one of the oft-repeated ways to make a case for film as a new art started by differentiating it from theatre. Even if it served as a negative example – the thing cinema was not that in turn illuminated what it was – an awareness of dramatic art and its

¹³³ Quoted in Henry K. Miller, "The birth of film criticism – 100 years ago today" in *The Guardian* (January 17th, 2012), accessed November 13th, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2012/jan/17/birth-film-criticism-100-years>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ González Casanova, *El cine que vio Fósforo*, 29.

¹³⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

criticism provided one of several starting points for finding ways to write about film. And if cinema as an art form was never completely “unencumbered by tradition,” it makes sense that its criticism would also have to grapple with its antecedents. *Fósforo*’s “new interpretation of cinema” was not entirely new either – it had to deal with its emergence from the chronicle, even if it tried to disentangle itself from it.

The repudiation of the chronicle happened through more than a pronouncement of absolute newness. Writers who wanted to leave the chronicle behind also turned to a series of hierarchical distinctions between genres. First, as in *Fósforo*’s statements, there was the dismissal of sentimentality. There is no denying the gushing of exclamation marks which Chávarri, Nervo and Tablada, among others, unleashed to give a proper account of their admiration for the cinematograph. But not all chroniclers were prone to sentimentality (Urbina and Noriega Hope certainly avoid it). More pertinently, one must question whether sentimentality is out of place in criticism. It is not if one differentiates between kinds of it. Within different national contexts, Warren Buckland and José Felipe Coria speak of “impressionistic criticism,” for example, as a brand of writing where romanticism belongs.¹⁴⁰ Impressionistic criticism produces epiphanies, wit, turns of phrase where the writer confesses to a personal connection she made with the show at hand. A broader definition of criticism would then include instances where there is no room for sentimentality – Buckland cites, for example, statistical style analysis as a form of criticism not based on impressions, but rather one that considers “film as a formal system.”¹⁴¹ When *Fósforo* asks for a new interpretation of cinema, he voices an implied objective to define the components of that formal system and to ground

¹⁴⁰ See José Felipe Coria, *Taller de cinefilia* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2006), 41, and Warren Buckland. “Revisiting ‘Solipsistic Film Criticism:’ Reply to Clayton and Klevan” in *Warren S. Buckland*, accessed November 17, 2015, 2, http://warrenbuckland.com/pdfs/Buckland_response_to_C_and_K.pdf

¹⁴¹ Buckland, “Revisiting Solipsistic Film Criticism,” 2.

writing about film on those findings rather than the critic's personal encounters with the pictures. But Casanova understands *Fósforo* wants to leave the chronicle and its sentimentality behind rather than expand notions of film writing where sentiment might be in order.

Whether it is possible to completely extricate a certain emotional involvement in any kind of writing is a claim I will not examine here. Instead, the question that arises is what is lost by preserving sentimentality. Precision and rigor come to mind, but also efficiency and concision. *Fósforo*'s assertion that chronicles tend to be "sentimental little speeches" connotes that they are too verbose, that they say more than it is necessary. Bonifant's writings, coming initially from women's magazines, were an obvious target for the charges of feminine sentimentality and loquaciousness. Sure enough, that was exactly how many men of letters viewed them, to the point that, according to Mahieux, they openly sought to distance themselves from women chronicles: "Bonifant embodied the fear of contagion that many male writers felt toward a mass culture that was usually considered feminine, even though they actively participated in it, and found that their contributions were difficult to distinguish from more 'literary' projects, like the short story or the novella." At stake was the very masculinity of writers like Arqueles Vela, a fellow chronicler of Bonifant's in the *Universal Ilustrado*, who sometimes dedicated his chronicles (under the column title "*Comentarios frívolos*," "Frisolous Comments") to his female colleague by mockingly pointing out how "feminine" they were. Vela, in Mahieux words, subscribed to the pervasive mentality that "the chronicle lacked the supposed virility of Mexican national literature" because it was a "hybrid and commercial genre."¹⁴² These male writers could only be taken seriously if they mastered the artistry of fiction or criticism rather than the stuff of giddy gossip columns.

¹⁴² Viviane Mahieux, "Cube Bonifant, una vida en la prensa" in *Letras Libres* (June 2014), <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/cube-bonifant-una-vida-en-la-prensa>

The disdain of sentiment paired with prolixity is reminiscent of Sarah Kozloff's argument that there is a certain, gendered divide between dialogue and action in American filmmaking culture, with an insistent perception that dialogue is decidedly feminine terrain and action the mark of consequential masculinity. Screenwriting handbooks more often than not advise writers to, in Stuart Rumens's words, "maximize the number of completely wordless scenes,"¹⁴³ while critics (again, broadly defined), looking at the works of key filmmakers, like Howard Hawks, and certain genres, like the Western, draw conclusions from how the male protagonists are potently taciturn. For Ed Buscombe, "[t]erseness is a tradition in the Western, in which loquaciousness is often associated with effeminacy."¹⁴⁴ Kozloff ultimately observes that these conclusions are more perceptual than actual, but the imperative that directness must prevail is also present in *Fósforo's* proposed new interpretation of film. Yet even if Bonifant herself would move successfully outside of the women's chronicle ghetto, it was at her most loquacious and personally involved with her subjects – one could say, adopting the milieu's perceptions, at her most "feminine" – that Bonifant was at her most inventive: "A certain rebelliousness was expected of her – it was inseparable from her irreverent and original profile – but her antagonism was not merely performative. She would often address a male readership... she spoke of soccer, cinema, the bullfights. She stridently engaged in polemics because she wanted to be heard beyond her role of "women's chronicler."¹⁴⁵ Her success was paradoxical on multiple levels.

In other words, rejecting her own confinement to the women's columns diversified and expanded the field of her observations and the language with which she deployed them. She tackled topics across gender lines, and did so with a forceful, piercing style that felt fresh and distinctive. If there was a desire to have a dialogue about the new medium and generate the

¹⁴³ Quoted in Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 66.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 143.

¹⁴⁵ Mahieux, "Cube Bonifant, una vida en la prensa."

words for it, verbosity only aided the finding of terms in Bonifant's case. Whatever phenomena took place in the picture houses to which Bonifant's eyes and ears were alert, the chronicler searched for ways to communicate them, producing a popular and influential *oeuvre*.

Which leads to another pair of arguments subsumed in searches for the origins of film criticism: that criticism can only exist when a medium becomes an art form, and that this happens when the medium acquires a language. I will not dispute these premises, but will say that instead of acquiring a language, a medium can acquire many, and that each manifestation of any of those languages would still hold experiences that are unique to it – experiences for which no amount of prior knowledge about film languages can provide the words. Instead, a film would tell the writer how to approach it, leading to the invention of new terms and ideas as often as the redeployment of old ones. The latter acknowledgment is central to Alex Clayton's idea of criticism: "The purpose is not chiefly to link [a] film's concerns to an item of interest beyond it... Nor is the idea to fit the film to the terms of an established paradigm. On the contrary, the vocabulary seems *called for*."¹⁴⁶ In González Casanova's purposefully schematic narrative, as film developed into a formal system, and a grammar started taking root, the critic's task was to locate that grammar and name its parts so they could be identified in future films. Consequently, new discoveries in that grammar would only increase the critic's lexicon. Alongside an awareness of those continuities, Bonifant never forgot the importance of the individual critical encounter – that is, the moments in a film that sparked the chattiness, élan and ingenuity of her chronicles. In response to assessments that see Bonifant stepping out of the chronicle arena to enter the larger, more prestigious terrain of criticism, I propose the style of her texts on film grew without abandoning the chronicle's ethos, part of which was the display of the writer taking clear pleasure in her wordsmithing. In Bonifant's work, there was both an attempt to identify cinema's

¹⁴⁶ Alex Clayton, "Coming to Terms" in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 35.

codes and a renewable enthusiasm to continue encountering cinema in every new film as if for the first time. Her writing on film was experimental, each piece a rehearsal for terminology Bonifant kept refining and enriching, but not systematic. Rather than moving away from her initial work when she turned to film criticism full-time, she did not jettison the spontaneous, improvised spirit of the chronicle. To put it in terms from the sections above, she consistently allowed film to inspire her literary imagination, letting it act as the phantom that possesses the writer and commands her language – as Clayton says, the terms are “called for.” Like ghosts, they are summoned from their enigmatic dimension.

I will return to the act of summoning, which is one of the recurring aspects of Bonifant’s writing, but first I want to list some important qualities of her chronicles’ style. Besides her sardonic wit, carried over from the days when she wrote of hurting children with her claws, three other attitudes stand out after her turn to film:

One: she became known for her highly critical attitude toward Hollywood cinema (a somewhat unfashionable stance among her peers) and toward hierarchies and injustices based on race and gender. Her chronicle of the 1927 adaptation of Harriet Beecher Store’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* includes both. It begins thusly: “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is so clean and humbly human it is surprising it’s a Yankee film,” and adds as a wrap-up: “If you have the tendencies of a slave trader (*negrero*) or if you believe Negros (*negros*) are inferior to the white race by nature and not because of the centuries of being treated like beasts of burden, don’t watch *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, lest you regrettably find yourself to be evil...”¹⁴⁷

Two: Bonifant was even more critical of Mexican society and cinema, but also a passionate advocate for the latter, which she often recognized as poorly developed. She felt it

¹⁴⁷ Cube Bonifant, “*La cabaña del tío Tom*” in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 284-285.

resembled “photographed theatre,” full of “hollow jabbering.”¹⁴⁸ Perhaps her most damning technical critique of Mexican cinema was that it was only “well-photographed banality.”¹⁴⁹ Again and again, Bonifant affirmed she hoped to see the national industry grow creatively through the refinement of its style and the representation of what she found to be national themes like, for example, the lives of the indigenous population. But even when the latter happened, it was not always a step forward. She even acknowledged that “Mexicans are the first to falsify [the Indian spirit] in literature, film, and music,”¹⁵⁰ and that often films catered to clichéd, shallow images of Mexican iconography: “Our films with autochthonous aspirations could be divided in two groups: filmed ‘*charrerías*’ [Mexican cowboy stories] where a certain, highly lucrative conception of regional tropes is put on celluloid, and the adaptation of certain North American ways of treating small-time people, both jokingly and seriously, to national types and settings without going beyond the surface.”¹⁵¹ She often referred to that superficial treatment as “filmed theater,” a cinema that was both aesthetically and thematically in “delayed evolution.”¹⁵² Her appraisal of Mexican cinema of the period reaches an important milestone in her chronicle of Fernando De Fuentes’s *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*Out in the Big Ranch*, 1936). Considered today a classic of cinema about the Mexican Revolution – if not on the level of De Fuentes’s other celebrated works, *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (*Let’s Go with Pancho Villa!* 1936) and *El compadre Mendoza* (*Godfather Mendoza*, 1934) – it failed to impress Bonifant, who found in it the same artificial, insincere outlook of *mexicanismo* (“Mexicanness”):

The film certainly pleased a lot of people and will please many more, but not because it is cinematic in the proper sense of the term, or because it interprets Mexican reality just as it is, but because it is a photographic transcription of the conventional *mexicanismo* of

¹⁴⁸ Bonifant, “*Con su amable permiso* (1940)” in *ibid.*, 304.

¹⁴⁹ Bonifant, “El nuevo amanecer de Julio Bracho (1943)” in *ibid.*, 314.

¹⁵⁰ Bonifant, “*Janitzio* (1935)” in *ibid.*, 297.

¹⁵¹ Bonifant, “El nuevo amanecer de Julio Bracho,” 312-313.

¹⁵² Bonifant, “Divagaciones sobre el cine nacional (1942)” in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 307.

our theatrical revues, which city dwellers have become used to mistaking for the real thing. Those fake *charros*, all made-up and cute... those outrageous, foolishly inhuman madams... the landowner that's as spineless as he is histrionic... the caricature from a Sunday comic strip... are all taken not from life, but from backstage.¹⁵³

Bonifant attributed such “steps back toward revue” mainly to “the lack of independent criticism,” which left only the filmmakers and actors to “be their own judges.”¹⁵⁴ She saw an antidote for excessively theatrical, hackneyed visions of Mexico in films like *Janitzio* (1935), directed by Carlos Navarro and starring Emilio Fernández and María Teresa Orozco. A film Bonifant compared to Murnau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931), *Janitzio* tells the story of a fisherman's struggle against the speculators encroaching on his livelihood. The tale was taken from a legend from the state of Michoacán and shot in the region, on the title island and the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro, where the island sits. It seems clear that Bonifant found *Janitzio* to be an exception for its focus on local folklore and location shooting. While her take on the film delineates more closely her own sense of “the cinematic” (and I will further discuss the clarity of that concept below), the criticisms she leveled at films of a hollow *mexicanismo* led to her own reductive statements about what she considered authentic representations of Mexican peoples. Notice how she comments on the film's form and how she sees in it an attempt to match, through pacing, the attitude she perceived in Native Mexicans:

Even the relative slowness of the film's rhythm is an apt choice, because it becomes a symbol of the identity of the legends' characters. The Mexican Indian is just the way they portray it in *Janitzio*: slow, long-suffering, quiet, of reactions that are delayed regardless of how vigorous they might eventually be. People like this cannot be moved quickly, in frames filled with violent action, because that would distort them.

¹⁵³ Bonifant, “*Allá en el rancho grande* (1936)” in *ibid.*, 302.

¹⁵⁴ Bonifant, “Divagaciones sobre el cine nacional,” 307.

Even that slowness, then, which is a flaw for some, is one of the many qualities of the film's clean and brilliant technique: a technique that for the first time is truly national, since it represents a premise full of Mexican character with a style of its own.¹⁵⁵

Despite such moments, Bonifant's pleas for a visible deliberateness, what she called a "vigor in the brushstrokes,"¹⁵⁶ and for a more diverse picture of Mexican society that avoided "the accessories of a Mexico for tourists," intended to direct Mexican cinema toward a greater sense of purpose and social self-reflection. In *Janitzio*, and its more thoughtful and intentional attempt at unity of form and content, Bonifant saw an art form that she quickly understood in political terms: the increasing internationalization of culture within which cinema grew to industrial levels and the national sensitivity of post-Revolutionary Mexico permeated her chronicles. In expressing a lack of independent critical bodies in a film landscape that failed to robustly wed a varied national identity with aesthetic experimentation, she also hoped to see the emergence of Mexican film writing, implying that it, like a Mexican cinema, had not yet been invented.

The subject of nationality supported a third recurring feature of her writings: her trust in the primacy of visuals in film. She initially rejected the inclusion of speech in cinema that synchronized sound made possible,¹⁵⁷ seeing it as essentially a way of "imposing the English language"¹⁵⁸ through the ubiquity of films from the United States. Her perspective on speech in the sound film was rather bleak:

When the city's picture houses all display a sign [asking viewers to "hear the picture!" as well as watch it], their seats will be empty.

¹⁵⁵ Bonifant, "Janitzio," 298-299.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 297.

¹⁵⁷ See Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992) for an account of the sound devices available in Bonifant's time. While she would have encountered different sound technologies, the ones she references most often are the Vitaphone, a disc-based analog sound recording system, and the Rodríguez Sound Recording System, reportedly the first portable device of its kind, and the invention of Mexican brothers Joselito and Roberto Rodríguez. They were responsible for the first Mexican sound film, *Santa* (1931).

¹⁵⁸ Bonifant, "Una producción totalmente hablada. ¡Óigala, véala! (1929)" in *Una pequeña Marquesa De Sade*, 287.

And given the speed at which we're getting there, that will happen very soon.

Film companies are forgetting that film is popular the world over because even animals are equipped to understand it – not every cinema lover has two feet; some of them have even more than four. Visualization has but one language, which is the eyes.¹⁵⁹

After the danger of ostracizing viewers who would not want words in a foreign language as both obstacle and distraction to their enjoyment, the sound film's biggest problem for Bonifant was the quality of the audio-playback. But once it advanced enough to provide examples of synchronization she found satisfactory, she enjoyed speech's expressive possibilities, to the point of finding there could be "pictorial"¹⁶⁰ effects to the use of sound (which still subsumed sound to visuals, but at the very least did not think sound was out of place in cinema). Similarly, she compared the presence of the microphone to the screen, in that both devices demanded the performers to act more naturalistically: "The screen, which makes people three or four times larger in size, demands the suppression of gestures, mannerisms and useless behaviors, the same way the microphone demands the lowering of one's voice."¹⁶¹ Dialogue spoken "without stopping" was, in her view, a smart, persuasive choice.¹⁶² Later, however, the issue was dubbing, in that she learned to appreciate the natural voices of actors as part of the draw of film spectacle. "Since shadows speak," she says in a chronicle about Hawks's *To Have and Have Not* (1942), "the least we could ask for is that they speak in their voice, which is sometimes full of personality. Who doesn't know Humphrey Bogart's voice?"¹⁶³ But whatever pleasure she found in voices, it was always secondary, and often the best she hoped for was for the dialogue to barely fill out a screen the images had already occupied. Ideally, as in the Golden Age classic

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 286.

¹⁶⁰ Bonifant, "El nuevo amanecer de Julio Bracho," 313.

¹⁶¹ Bonifant, "Con su amable permiso," 305.

¹⁶² Bonifant, "La mujer del puerto (1934)" in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 295.

¹⁶³ Bonifant. "La máxima lata (1945)" in *ibid.*, 318.

Distinto amanecer (*Another Dawn*, 1943), “cinema fulfills the totality of its faculties: the images speak, the action expresses the filmmaker’s thoughts, the dialogue only just completes, like many other elements, the symphony of suggestions that is the film.”¹⁶⁴ In turning to the musical metaphor here, Bonifant appears to ultimately favor the aural – if sound could have pictorial effects, it seems images could, in turn, acquire the quality of music. Her position on sound was not intractable. Her writings, while often imbued with patriotism, were never jingoistic.

The one consistent quality of her writings that I wish to highlight is their inventiveness, and the moments where she let loose in her criticism the way she did in her chronicles. Calling a film “a symphony of suggestions” is one such instance, an alliterative musing (also in the Spanish “*sinfonía de sugeriones*”) that evocatively attributes assertive artistry to the film’s subtlety. I will linger on those moments to conclude this examination of Bonifant’s writings and her style, looking for how she solved descriptive problems. In keeping with the idea that film criticism has become her claim to literary status, I will read these instances, where her writing pushes against the edges of the language available to describe cinema, through Ricardo Garibay’s concept of the “literary whereabouts” (“*paradero literario*”), his term for “a sentence where [the reader] must stop... and enjoy the shade” in reflection,¹⁶⁵ a stumbling upon “a sudden edge of lucidity.”¹⁶⁶ A reading strategy with which Garibay approached literary fictions, the location of literary whereabouts in Bonifant’s work gives an idea of how her writing searched for accounts of the films, and how her own voice distinguished her beyond her well-known opinions. Her work showed a clear commitment to cultivating a personality, but also let the media on which she commented summon words from her. In those words, there is an inkling of her

¹⁶⁴ Bonifant, “El nuevo amanecer de Julio Bracho,” 314.

¹⁶⁵ Ricardo Garibay, *Oficio de leer* (Mexico City: Océano, 1996), 74. See also his “reader’s itinerary” to his own literary whereabouts, *Paraderos Literarios* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1995).

¹⁶⁶ Ricardo Garibay, *Paraderos literarios*, 5.

ontological sense of cinema as fuel for the literary imagination, and of how she approached it with the eye of a poet and a fiction writer.

Take the following examples of her chronicles. The first is perhaps the clearest example of media-inspired verbal invention. Playing on the form of radio news programs of the period for *El Ilustrado* in the 1930s, she created a humorous column titled “*Estación radiodifusora del Ilustrado, por QB*” (“*El Ilustrado’s Radio Station, by QB*”). A satirical re-enactment of radio broadcasts in printed prose, with the day/month/year dates as titles for the pieces, the column bracketed a biting joke with sounds that resembled the noises of tuning in search for a radio frequency, like so:

CU CU

In the last ten months, 2972 Mexicans entered the United States, while 7763 left. However, there is no word on those who stayed there.

CU CU¹⁶⁷

At times, the capitalized onomatopoeias were explicitly sound effects that turned her column into the script of a radio drama:

TACATACATACATACA

(That’s the sound of a machine gun)

For filler, a little reflection: why does our revolutionary regime favor reactionary tendencies over radical ones?

Because after our defunct revolution, all we have left are many dead men who died fighting in it, and countless living rich men.

TACATACATACATACA¹⁶⁸

In trying to reproduce, in her writing, the quality of the radio’s aural experience, she appears to have located in the sounds the fabric of the medium.

¹⁶⁷ Bonifant, “(23/VII/1931)” in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 260.

¹⁶⁸ Bonifant, “(2/II/1933)” in *ibid.*, 274.

With film, there are mostly just clues – enticing passages where she seems to approach a definition of cinema’s language, but does not quite get there beyond a few gestures. Here are some literary whereabouts on cinema:

In her piece on *La mujer del puerto* (*The Woman of the Port*, 1934), a film partly inspired by Guy de Maupassant’s story “*Le Port*” directed by Russian *émigré* and pioneer of Mexican cinema Arcady Boytler, Bonifant proposes an idea of the cinematic that conveys the importance she places in the director’s job (one could conclude she considered film a director’s medium) and a sense that vividness is central to film art:

[Boytler’s] skills as a director are beyond doubt. One can tell that he knows the use and value of every single element that constitutes the impression of a film. In most scenes... you feel the presence of someone who knows how to turn into reality what is fiction (that is what film art is about) and how to appreciate the qualities of the piece. His recreation of Maupassant’s environment is full of vigor. These scenes could very well be the first signs of life from our national cinema. And of course it had to be a foreigner who had to come and show our fellow countrymen how to make films!¹⁶⁹

The word “vigor” appears again and again in her criticism (it would later, as we saw above, in her review of *Janitzio*). I see three implications in that choice: first is, again, her belief that a feature film must achieve a palpable purposefulness – its narration should play as something visibly designed. A scene where protagonist Rosario (Andrew Palma), a woman who escaped the capital after the painful end of a relationship and became a prostitute at a coastal town, enters a funeral agency, is illustrative of what Bonifant could have identified as vigorous filmmaking. Rosario arrives to see Don Antonio (Fabio Acevedo), who coughs while putting a coffin together. Before her entrance, the camera takes in the room in slow glides between Don Antonio’s table and agency owner Don Basilio’s (Antonio Polo) desk. When Rosario walks back outside, she does so under the watchful eye of Don Basilio, his attention underscored by an emphatic tracking shot that pushes closer to him and partially circles from facing him head on

¹⁶⁹ Bonifant, “*La mujer del puerto*,” 295.

to standing by his side. This movement has an urgency that the previous tracking shots throughout the workshop do not possess. In cases like this, the vigor is more literal – an energetic camera movement, for example. Second, in conjunction with her argument that film art is about turning fiction into reality, the vigor in the directorial choices is also meant to inject in the world of the film a vibrancy that approaches that of the one of the world outside the film in its quietness – it’s a vibrancy that does not need to announce or call attention to itself. And Bonifant adds that vibrancy also has to do with the ability to make all of the many parts of a film count for its impact. She speaks of the sheer quantity of details in filmmaking when she refers to “every single element that constitutes the impression of a film,” and suggests a rich, fully-fleshed atmosphere in spotting the “recreation of Maupassant’s environment.”¹⁷⁰ It is a move not unlike the musical imagery of her initial remarks about *Distinto amanecer*, which she calls, besides “a symphony of suggestions,” an “orchestral” film, and likens it to “a chamber music performance in which the value of the players is measured by how each of them can best contribute to the combined emotional effect of the ensemble.”¹⁷¹ *La mujer del puerto* also holds this quality of precise coordination. Returning to the scene in the funeral agency, Bonifant could be responding to how that moment observes the craftsmanship involved in making coffins: the sounds of hammering and wood shaving line the scene, and there is careful attention paid to the hands of the carpenter. Visually regarding the process, an activity appropriate for the setting but incidental to the plot, makes the place feel both lived in and important to the story for its meaning – in this case, as a reminder of the death of Rosario’s father, a tragedy that further drove her away from her hometown. A director’s job in Bonifant’s estimation is to orchestrate all the pieces of a scene to cumulatively move the viewer.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Bonifant, “El nuevo amanecer de Julio Bracho,” 315.

There is a level of attention to detail, however, that in her eyes did not produce a vivid image, but a still, stagey one. The works of Emilio Fernández, often the key figure in accounts of Mexican cinema's Golden Age with films like *Flor silvestre* (1943), *María Candelaria* (1944), and *La perla* (1947), was for Bonifant a director of unquestionable talent put to non-cinematic use. Drawing notices for the painterly beauty of his compositions (the result of his famous collaboration with legendary cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa), his appropriation of Soviet montage (we will later discuss the enormous influence of Eisenstein in Mexican film culture), and his portrayals of indigenous characters and stories, Fernández would seem to fulfill Bonifant's wishes for Mexican film and, for a long time, Fernández's name and work were synonymous with the very idea of the country's national cinema. Yet Bonifant proved more skeptical when she offered her thoughts on his film *Río Escondido* (1948), finding that the impact of Fernández's images seemed borrowed from other art forms. It is another literary destination in Bonifant that calls for help from other media to define what is happening in a motion picture:

Certainly we have not yet spoken of the film's technical achievement, because it would deserve a whole chapter of its own, despite the fact that it is not possible to modify what has been said about Emilio Fernández's style: that his technique, in joyous tandem with Figueroa, brims with theatrical staging and balletic figures. Perhaps that is why the audience is so tolerant of the misery the film showcases: it is photographed with scenic effects. There is always a beautiful, desolate plain with a motionless figure in it; always a row of Indian women wearing a shawl in the exact same way and ever ready to perform a dance; always figures standing against the last light of dusk; in other words, the invariable tendency to subordinate the life of action to the meticulous arrangement of the scene. That explains why Emilio Fernández's tales look like a painting exhibit.¹⁷²

While it is possible to call Fernández and Figueroa's *mise-en-scène* vigorously, rigorously composed, the pulsating vividness that Bonifant considered the basis of cinema is simply not present in Fernández's films. Partly the problem lies in how his approach fails to reveal more

¹⁷² Bonifant, "Ballet y cuadros plásticos" in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 323.

about the people on the screen. See how Bonifant talks about what the pictorially scenic treatment does to close-ups of lead actress María Félix in *Río Escondido*:

Nobody ignores that the close-up's objective is to give relief to gestures and expressions; however, in María Félix's case, her close-ups aim at nothing more than to flaunt the woman, since all that the actress conveys is which pose favors her the most. The camera ecstatically contemplates her, and even though she is exceptionally beautiful, a film is not simply a pretty face alternating appearances with theatrical scenes.¹⁷³

The passage above contains a key word in Bonifant's criticism, perhaps one of the few terms that enjoys some continuity in her chronicle-infused reviews: "relieve," or "relief." The prolixity and semantic diversity that distinguished her approach has moments when a descriptive word insists on appearing. What is significant about her concept of "relief" is that it represents an alternative to "depth," suggesting, in its literal meaning, levels of perspective that are not an illusion perpetrated on a flat surface (like a screen) but, instead, a real topography of peaks and valleys. In that regard, "relief" connotes a vision of cinema that reminds us of the ghost wrenching itself from the screen. Bonifant uses the word metaphorically, demanding shade and nuance from screen characters and situations. But her choice of imagery importantly communicates a sense that the vividness she always hoped to find in cinema produced an effect similar to that of Quiroga and Bioy Casares's phantoms – one that gave the impression of cinematic images jumping out right at the audience.

There is a lengthy definition and defense of "relief" in film in Bonifant's piece on Fernando de Fuentes's directorial debut, *El anónimo* (*The Anonymous Message*, 1933), one of the earliest feature films with synchronized sound made in Mexico. A three-character chamber melodrama about blackmail and murder between a doctor, his wife, and her lover, it impressed Bonifant for the lighter touch of the performances, which stood in stark contrast to the grand,

¹⁷³ Ibid., 322-323.

theatrical gestures of many of its contemporaries. The film, which she still found flawed, served to underline what she felt was a shortcoming of Mexican cinema: its flatness. In *El anónimo*, she says,

[t]here are pleasantly natural scenes, like the ones in the clinic. The dialogue is carried with ease and the action is normal. Besides the actors' speaking slightly louder, nothing betrays the presence of a camera and a microphone.

But the national film industry still suffers – *El anónimo*, which is the most discrete film from the National Company, notwithstanding – from its principal fault: its lack of relief.

Mexican cinema is completely flat: it has all the ethos and signs of photography. Its characters can never stand out. They are missing the third dimension.

The actors' good work is a genuine exception, and yet the relief of the characters they play – which, in another exception, they nonetheless have – is nowhere to be found.¹⁷⁴

A few statements deserve closer inspection. First is the trajectory she charts from theater to cinema to photography. That the film showed “discretion” in its execution echoes Quiroga’s “sobriety of expression,” the argument that, for cinema to disengage itself from theater and become its own art form, its approach to human behavior had to be closer to life, letting gestures, faces and objects speak for themselves. And like Quiroga, and not far from the tradition of French Impressionism that enshrined *photogenie*, Bonifant thought the vigor and vibrancy of the film came from that discretion, from letting something be on screen, without theatrics – an accomplishment even more remarkable in this case, as the film, in Bonifant’s account, was adapted from a stage play.¹⁷⁵ But once the filmmakers succeeded in being discrete, Bonifant tells us, the film remains flat, and does so by resembling photography. Her view of photography as a producer of signs without depth or texture is certainly arguable, but it is noteworthy how she mentions photography to complicate her idea of relief. Perhaps there is something that movement

¹⁷⁴ Bonifant, “*El anónimo* (1933)” in *Una pequeña Marquesa de Sade*, 291.

¹⁷⁵ Other sources, however, credit the original screenplay to de Fuentes. See “Fernando de Fuentes” in *Escritores del cine mexicano sonoro*, accessed April 20th, 2015, http://escritores.cinemexicano.unam.mx/biografias/F/FUENTES_carrau_fernando_de/biografia.html

and time allow cinema to do to add that “third dimension,” as if the motion of the characters’ bodies, when properly performed (discretely, naturally) and photographed (with vigor but without pictorialism or painterly or theatrical compositions) made them somehow reveal their interiority. The interiority, in turn, has *volume* – again, it is not a property of character that allows the viewer to become immersed into them, to somehow invade them, but rather to witness that inner life acquire an imposing shape before the viewer’s eyes.

Giving relief and volume to the characters, however, happens in different ways. Bonifant’s claim that the characters in *El anónimo* have relief by virtue of the actors’ performances, even though that relief is “nowhere to be found,” suggests that the relief has been brought about through cinematic means, and that De Fuentes and his actors have managed to make their film behave cinematically and, therefore, strongly suggest an inner life. So what went wrong? The characters’ conflicts, both personal and collective, are recognizable, but they “do not move us. Why? Because our national cinema still misses how to capture the inner life of the characters it brings to the screen.”¹⁷⁶ I understand her words here, which she does not elaborate further, to mean that she is now speaking in narrative terms. The film’s aesthetic might be more developed (she does call the film a sign of “progress”¹⁷⁷), but as inferred from her disappointment at the unearned happy ending of the film, it is in the writing that the film fails to honor the construction of relief. For Bonifant, there are many routes toward relief in cinema, but they all point, or should point, toward the same voluminous vibrancy, toward characters that pop out and can outgrow their screened confines.

That Bonifant, in her own way, dreamed of the cinematograph’s production of ghosts is akin to Quiroga and Bioy Casares’s fantasy, but there is an important difference. The female

¹⁷⁶ Bonifant, “*El anónimo*,” 292.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

ghosts in the fictions of the latter two are indeed vivid, so that the writers have them stand so close to the living characters that they can touch them. But they are largely figures of passive wonder or, in the case of Quiroga's "*El vampiro*," danger. The male characters in those fictions fall in love with them because of their cinematic vibrancy, something they acquire simply by the fact of their mediation. They are always remote, always out of reach, seductively unknowable like the film stars that inspired them. As a result, they do not have inner lives. Bonifant shared the wonder of vivid cinematic images, but she did not think it was complete without an eloquence beyond the visual. Her 1948 statements of "images speaking" in *Distinto amanecer* recall André Bazin's observation that "silent" films like Stroheim's *Greed* (1924) and Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) are "already virtually talking films."¹⁷⁸ The relief Bonifant expected films to create came from similarly articulate phantoms, who were almost corporeal in a cinema that was never flat or silent, but always communicative and expressive. Still, Bonifant does not entirely name what it was that gave ghosts that relief. Instead, she comes asymptotically close. After writing that Mexican cinema continually fails to capture the inner lives of its characters, she elides what "capturing inner lives" would entail. But rather than define and theorize cinema's capacity to foster imaginative thinking, she let that capacity guide her writing. There is something fitting in a certain paucity of theoretical reflexivity – which, it must be said, could have been the product not of refusal or disinterest, but of the demands of journalistic publications – in this case, for theorizing the ghost partially means failing to honor its petition: that those with whom it comes in contact find inspiration in it. Creativity is the cinematic ghost's prerequisite. In the first decades of film criticism in Mexico, there were writers who appeared to have responded to apparitions without exorcising them with explanations. Bonifant caps that

¹⁷⁸ André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" in *What is Cinema? Vol. I*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 28.

period as arguably Mexico's first literary luminary to have come from film criticism. The world in film was her source. Her muses lived within the screen, and the success of her writing made her inspiration equal to that of the authors whose subject matter was not captured on celluloid.

3.0 *NUEVO CINE* FROM CRITICISM TO FILMMAKING TO LITERATURE

3.1 A SURREAL LOVE: SALVADOR ELIZONDO'S EROTIC MUSES

3.1.1 Introduction: Before *Nuevo Cine*

The previous chapter ends with Cube Bonifant's criticism, which covered the period between the last years of the silent era and the heart of the *Edad de Oro* - specifically 1948, when she retired from journalism. The current chapter focuses on *Nuevo Cine*, the name of both a group of writers and of the film-centered journal they founded in 1961. Binding those eras are their respective efforts to guide Mexican film culture, through poetic writing and filmmaking, into a practice of greater aesthetic and ideological ambitions during times when critics found the national industry intolerable. The thirteen years between Bonifant and *Nuevo Cine* – mostly the fifties – saw a stabilization of critical discourse that in turn led to the paucity of poetic investigations and overt, channeled attempts to reinvent cinematic theory and praxis in Mexico. Before delving into *Nuevo Cine*, I will briefly describe the writing of two critics representative of the transitional period: Álvaro Custodio and Francisco Pina.

The strand of criticism in Mexican film writing I call “poetic” has a few features that help discern its presence – qualities that give the writing a seemingly excessive *frisson* of enjoyment. Those qualities can emerge from very diverse sources and in a wide variety of forms, but the two that I highlight in order to locate a contribution to film theory in Mexican cinematic thought are

literary invention and a transformative spirit. The writers within these chapters represent two kinds of critics: the ones who had careers in literary genres, and those who saw in criticism a way to fulfill their literary ambitions. Álvaro Custodio (1912-1992) belongs to the former category: he was a writer who dabbled in criticism. A playwright, screenwriter and novelist, Custodio wrote reviews for the daily *Excelsior*, and in 1952 published a volume on cinema, *Notas sobre el cine*. But rather than visibly conflating his criticism with his literary work, the slim book expresses well the kind of writing after which Custodio seemed to be: erudite, informative, rigorous and, by his own admission, devoid of pleasure and *jouissance*. The book's preface, "*A manera de exordio*" ("By Way of Preamble"), makes the latter absence clear from the start:

I will confess something to you, trusted reader: I do not love cinema. Nor do I abhor it; I merely tolerate it.

Do not ask me why I practice criticism. I do not know. Perhaps because of inertia. Or perhaps to satisfy a need. I am more demanding than many would hope, but not as much as others make me out to be. I write criticism as I best understand it, I try to be sincere and make no apologies for it.¹

The terseness, which has not yet appeared in our history of Mexican film criticism, makes it surprising that Custodio would recognize a certain unconscious impulse in his criticism ("I do not know") – a move not unlike the one with which many artists refer to the cognitively impenetrable source of their inspiration. But that recognition, like the entire preamble to his book, is designed to rhetorically eliminate pretension. Custodio assures the reader that there are more important pursuits in life than cinema, and although he allows for the possibility of a secret need within himself, he also conveys it alongside a not-so-veiled explanation that he writes criticism mostly out of economic necessity: "If I were a man of means, I would dedicate my life

¹ Álvaro Custodio, *Notas sobre el cine* (Mexico City: Patria, 1952),

to contemplation, perhaps even the contemplation of cinema, but you best believe I would *never* try to make a film. The commercial competition and artistic achievement do not tempt me. Cinema is not a medium of expression, but a simple – and how remarkably simple! – vehicle for entertainment.” If that’s the extent of cinema’s ideological reach, then, the reader should look elsewhere to “achieve supreme wisdom... That’s why there are political and religious doctrines, art and other resources that have come to believe in themselves and that search, in their own terms, the attainment of their ideals.” By contrast, “cinema leads nowhere.”²

From within his skepticism about cinema’s visionary capabilities, he provides many lists: the awards recipients from both the American and the Mexican Academies of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences; his selections of the best films, directors, actors, actresses and cinematographers from both the silent and sound periods and all over world (ranked in groups of twelve rather than the more common five, ten or twenty); an international directory of film theaters active in 1948; a breakdown of production costs as they were back in the same year; and even a vocabulary of film-related terms. By compiling (rather than creating) this information for the reader, Custodio reveals an unmistakably didactic intent, making his book a set of tools like canonical pointers and overviews of institutional forms of appreciation.³ Custodio’s writing shares its objectives with Clayton and Klevan’s notion of the best criticism, which “*deepens* our interest in individual films, *reveals* new meanings and perspectives, *expands* our sense of the medium, *confronts* our assumptions about value, and *sharpens* our capacity to discriminate.”⁴ It does not, however, revel in its materiality and style, or advance through heuristic moves. The question of value is particularly telling, since in *Notas sobre el cine*, Custodio delineates

² Ibid., 7.

³ *Notas sobre el cine* does collect Custodio’s take on several individual films, among them *Los olvidados* (1950), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Stromboli* (1950) – all arranged without apparent order and showcasing a language that seeks precision and clarity.

⁴ Clayton and Klevan, “Introduction” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 1.

established structures of taste, like the Oscars and Mexico's Arieles, rather than directly and consistently confront them. And when it comes to lingering on his impressions, or crafting a star persona, or harnessing film's visionary incentives to find unexpected solutions to ekphrastic problems – some of the peculiarities of the literary inventiveness of poetic inquiry as established in the introduction – these appear only sporadically in Custodio's reviews.

One of Custodio's contemporaries, Francisco Pina (1900 – 1971) was also a writer, but of a different sort and one that could be said to have practiced an unusual form of poetic investigation. Pina engaged in two kinds of novelistic translations – fictions from French to Spanish, and screenplays to prose fiction for the magazine *La Novela Semanal Cinematográfica*. According to *Nuevo Cine* co-founder José de la Colina, Pina could not resist inserting his own sensibility in the job of committing a script to a novel's structure, "assigning an ideology" to characters of whom he was fond. Pina's creative contribution was both investigative and explanatory, a revelation of implied character dynamics (a lot of which he effectively fabricated) and a commentary on the script's perspective on the world. That interest in a "mainly moral point of view" was the hallmark of his criticism, which appeared in the Sunday supplement of the magazines *Novedades* and *Siempre*. What Pina asked from movies was a "spiritual position towards life," and attributed a film's stance to its director. For de la Colina, Pina persuasively communicated to their readers that film was an "art of individual expression."⁵ Pina, like Custodio, treated film criticism as work associated with, but separate from, a literary enterprise. Yet Pina clearly did not share Custodio's anti-romanticism. Simply read how Pina ends his biography of Charles Chaplin (whose humanistic take on humor he compares to that of two Spanish authors, Pío Baroja and Ramón Gómez de la Serna, thus revealing Pina's resolutely

⁵ José de la Colina, quoted in Manuel Aznar Soler, "Francisco Pina, crítico del cine de Luis Buñuel en su exilio mexicano" in *Exilio y cine* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 2012), 219.

literary affiliations), with a toast full of admiration for the filmmaker's work: "Here's to you, Charlie Chaplin! May your life remain light until death forces you to perform the last – and perhaps most comical – of your pirouettes!"⁶ I agree with the following assessment from Ayala Blanco about Custodio and Pina's status in this history, which makes them crucial figures for keeping criticism alive before it found, in *Nuevo Cine*, representatives of much more nakedly visionary, literary and revolutionary determination:

More than specialists, these are honest, cultured men of good taste who wish to rise to the occasion. They compensate the lack of vocational urgency with an on-the-go learning curve, they read a few foreign books and magazines on the subject, they meticulously argue their opinions. For the first time the names of Charles Chaplin, Orson Welles, René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein and Emilio Fernández are written by people who not only admire these filmmakers, but also respond to that admiration with knowledge and ideas of their own.⁷

De la Colina furthers that sense of safekeeping for the future when he explains the progression from the pioneering chroniclers to Pina, who remained a critic long after Custodio had moved on: in Pina's columns, de la Colina argues, "film criticism restarted, now much more regularly. If this branch of journalism had illustrious predecessors in Mexico (Reyes, Villaurrutia, Luz Alba, etc.), Pina institutionalized it, so to speak." Pina gave it a constancy that was vital for readers like *Nuevo Cine*'s crew, for he provided a reliable source to expand the latter's cinematic education. Through their work, which they composed in the largely disengaged critical scene of the fifties – what Gustavo García has called "the lost decade"⁸ of Mexico's mishandled industrialization – Custodio and Pina served as references for budding cinephiles. They were, for many nascent film lovers like de la Colina and his colleagues, "the first authoritative, honest and insightful guide."⁹

⁶ Francisco Pina, *Charles Chaplin: Genio de la desventura y de la ironía* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1957), 339.

⁷ Jorge Ayala Blanco. *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1993), 209.

⁸ Gustavo García, "La década perdida: cine mexicano de los años cincuenta" in *El cine mexicano a través de la crítica*, eds. Gustavo García and David Maciel (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001), 189.

⁹ De la Colina, quoted in Aznar Soler, "Francisco Pina..." 219.

In other words, Pina and Custodio presided over a period of seemingly contradictory attributes; their work brought to the critical community a feeling of relative stability and continuity despite the scarcity of voices before the sudden, incandescent flash of revolution that *Nuevo Cine* hoped to become. Their undeniable importance in Mexican film thought lies precisely in their transitional position between moments when inventiveness effervesced.

But if *Nuevo Cine*'s writers found solace and promise in Custodio and Pina's criticism, they were eager to unleash the potential of their lessons upon the period's film industry, which they found, for reasons I will discuss below, severely lacking. Their immodest aim, as listed in the first point of the manifesto with which they opened their inaugural issue, was a fundamental change: "Overcoming Mexican cinema's depressing state."¹⁰ The way they carried out that plan makes their journal a touchstone for poetic investigation: they sought to integrate film criticism and study with filmmaking. Rather than understanding these activities as fairly discrete entities, these writers treated all writing on, about and for film as if it were of a piece – whether writing reviews, essays, screenplays or actually making films, these were all creative endeavors channeled toward the reinvention of Mexican film production. This chapter looks in detail at the context that led them to respond so vehemently to Mexican cinema's condition at the end of the fifties, how their philosophy toward criticism made it a means and an end in itself, and how they positioned criticism and filmmaking as different versions of a common project that was both intellectual and aesthetic. On one level, through the pages of *Nuevo Cine*, the idea of criticism as a form of poetry manifests in a desire to make cinema come alive even in print form. On another level, *Nuevo Cine*'s brand of poetic inquiry also becomes, to borrow a term from Hamid Naficy, an accented form of film writing, in that a source of its creativity, and its quest for literary

¹⁰ José de la Colina et al., "Manifiesto del grupo Nuevo Cine" in *Nuevo Cine*, 1 (April 1961): 1. The manifesto is dated January 1961.

inventiveness, can be partly traced to another condition of imaginary and imaginative existence: the exilic status of many of the group's founders. Poetic investigation in Mexico thus continued to be haunted, in this case by a lost home.

3.1.2 Fertile Ground: Spanish Exiles, Mexico City and Mexican Cinema in the Fifties

What conditions made Mexican cinema's state so depressing in *Nuevo Cine's* eyes? And what position did they occupy that inspired and enabled them to take steps toward correcting it? The emergence of a non-academic, independent film journal in the early sixties, the first of its kind in Mexico, exposes its provenance quite clearly. Four histories converged in the journal: the travails of Spanish Civil War exile writers, the process of Mexico City's accelerated growth, the twilight of Mexican cinema's Golden Age, and several movements of post-World War II international cinema. *Nuevo Cine's* writers made their influences and political aims clear, often plainly interweaving them.

The stories of exile precede the political, social and cinematic changes that took place in the 1950s in the Mexican capital. Custodio and Pina left their native Spain in 1940 and 1939 respectively, driven out because of their active association with the Second Republic before and during the Spanish Civil War. Pina arrived in Mexico the same year after a brief stay in France, while Custodio traveled through the Dominican Republic and Cuba to finally land on Mexican soil in 1944. Custodio arrived somewhat later, but it is often quoted that President Lázaro Cárdenas's administration admitted between twenty- and thirty-thousand Spanish exiles between 1939 and 1940 – about a quarter of them members of an intellectual class.¹¹ They founded

¹¹ Carlos Tello Díaz, "Exilio español en México" in *Milenio* (October 30th, 2014), http://www.milenio.com/firmas/carlos_tello_diaz/Exilio-espanol-Mexico_18_400339968.html. Tello writes on the eve of the commemoration of seventy-five years of the Spanish exile in Mexico, and marvels that it

several cultural and academic institutions in Mexico, among them the *Colegio de México* (higher education) and *Colegio Madrid* (secondary and primary education). For Mario Ojeda Revah, Cárdenas intended the exile's presence as a neutralizer for a right-wing uprising in México like the one that had taken place in Spain.¹² Pina and Custodio, who had held public titles in the Second Republic – as a social worker and a diplomat, respectively – were active participants in Mexican culture through their literary work. They, like many other Spanish Republicans, also brought their children along. It was that generation of exiles, born just before the Spanish Civil War, who would come of age in a country that was not their own, but to which they ostensibly could lay claim for having been raised there from infancy into a literary and cultural scene they felt they had the energy, will and talent to change. Their nostalgia for their homeland, while strong, must have also been largely a component of their upbringing, so their remove from Spain demanded they inhabited an imaginary home for much longer than their parents, who left well into their adulthood. This is the *Nuevo Cine* generation.

Contesting with their memories of peninsular life was the profoundly contrasting backdrop of a metropolis in transformation. The critics who founded *Nuevo Cine* were college students in *Ciudad Universitaria*, the National University's main campus in southern Mexico City, which was built and completed in 1952. At the same time, President Miguel Alemán's government (1946-1952) pushed for both greater industrialization and protection for landowners in the country's rural areas, forcing many field workers to seek employment in the capital. By the early 1950s, austerity policies greeted the influx of people into Mexico City. Following Alemán, President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines's regime (1952-1958) reduced public spending, curbed (or attempted to curb) monopolistic practices, and strengthened tax laws. At the same time, and with

wasn't until ten years earlier, in 2004, that a book detailing Mexico's policy toward Civil War Spain had not yet appeared. He refers to Mario Ojeda Revah, *México y la guerra civil española* (Madrid: Turner, 2004).

¹² Quoted in Tello Díaz, "Exilio español en México."

the university as its flagship ideal, the image of a wholesome bourgeoisie – which the Cortines administration defined as the intended endgame of the Revolution – was propagated through both public reminders of an urban lifestyle (billboards encouraging students to attend university and live a comfortable middle class existence) and citywide, homogenizing measures meant to protect public order, decency, and wages. One of the casualties was entertainment considered immoral and a waste of salaries, like cabarets and revue theaters.

Those developments brewed after the establishment of the *Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica* (Law of the Film Industry) in 1949, which finally attached cinema to the State Department and, in García's words, "gave coherence to various political and economic attitudes that accidentally or uncontrollably affected cinema." Restrictions and close surveillance of film productions ensued, made tighter by the *Banco Cinematográfico* (Film Bank), the state's solution to streamline access to production resources. Founded in 1942, it did not start operations until 1948. But rather than solve the "industry's vices," like overspending, it quickly "began showing symptoms of inefficiency." For instance, García observes that it fomented deceptive practices: producers looking for actual write-offs came to the *Banco* knowing they would not see their investment back. Often in those cases, the films were simply an excuse, and treated accordingly.¹³ Censorship, in the form of content guidelines and capital control, and the discouragement for producing films with care and patience, channeled production into genres that were sternly, blatantly moralistic, particularly in their vision of youth (the "difficult teenager" film, like Alejandro Galindo's *La edad de la tentación* [1956]) or that dealt with subjects like horror and eroticism from within the problematic safety of camp and caricature. About the latter, a primary mover of that trajectory was also television's destabilizing advent, which made *luchadores*, often-costumed acrobatic wrestlers, so popular that by the early sixties,

¹³ García, "La década perdida" in *El cine mexicano a través de la crítica*, 197.

filmmakers made them movie stars to attract audiences. As García puts it, “current film trends, like spy movies, horror movies, fantasy and detective stories, took refuge in *luchador* films.” *El Santo contra las mujeres vampiro* (1962) made of its central hero, silver-masked *Santo* (wrestler and actor Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta), an intelligence agent plunged into the atmosphere of the haunted castle of an undead countess, while *El Santo contra el rey del crimen* (1962) had him tackle a cinematic gangster underworld. The dimensions of *lucha libre*’s popular reach might be hinted at in García’s assertion that the *luchador* film, “such a secondary subgenre of humble origins... nevertheless spawned the only massive screen idol capable of competing with Pedro Infante in terms of audience admiration: *El Santo*.”¹⁴ *Santo*’s cheaply made adventures are often labeled symptomatic of a cinema in crisis, but as we will see below, the moralistic films, and their casual mixture of repression and titillation, were far more alarming for *Nuevo Cine*, and more indicative of a cultural poverty against which to rebel.

Yet that poverty was not total. During the fifties, *Nuevo Cine*’s writers saw the new forms of popular entertainment stand next to major works of some of Mexico’s most influential intellectuals. Besides the institutions exiles built, the decade framed many important pieces of film and literature. Eventual Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad*, and its still-quoted observations on the Mexican identity, saw print in 1950, as did *Pedro Páramo*, Juan Rulfo’s ghost-filled novel that became a precursor of the Latin American Boom. The two Elenas, Poniatowska and Garro, made the first perceivable waves of their careers. In terms of cinema, before the rise of *Santo*, the fifties were the most productive years of Luis Buñuel’s Mexican period, beginning with the international success of *Los olvidados* (1950). Arguably the most celebrated exile filmmaker, Buñuel would become *Nuevo Cine*’s muse, both for his films and the displacement he shared with several of the journal’s critics. Accompanying Buñuel’s ascension

¹⁴ Ibid., 199.

was the fading of key figures of the Golden Age, who slowly became far less prolific because of the growing difficulty of securing financial backing. As the Golden Age receded further and further, slowly becoming yet another ghost under whose illusion the national industry continued to operate, *Nuevo Cine*'s writers quickly canonized Buñuel and his films as shining examples of what Mexican cinema was capable of. It wasn't so much a total absence of striking films, but the fact of their reduced presence, that largely spurred the kind of essays that became *Nuevo Cine*'s hallmarks. The increasingly conservative and conformist climate of Mexico City, combined with the real presence of a thriving, rich literary scene and powerful, compelling talents in cinematic circles, place *Nuevo Cine* at a particularly fruitful juncture. And that is before counting the irresistible, inevitable pull the French *Nouvelle Vague* had for them, one which, given its ties to *Cahiers du cinéma*, seemed like a towering example to follow. The parallel thirst for newness is already there in the monikers of both groups, like it was in Neorealism before them and in another contemporary movement of cinematic renovation, Brazil's *Cinema Novo*. Ayala Blanco summarizes their moment in his customary recitative mode:

A new kind of reader emerges: one that seeks awareness and sophisticated dissidence rather than orientation. A new kind of spectator emerges: one that assiduously attends film clubs and stands in line at the box office during previews. A new kind of snob emerges: one that discovers cinema in each film by Fellini, Antonioni and Lester, believes that film is the seventh art, that it was born yesterday in Europe and can be reduced to two or three names. A new kind of young intellectual emerges: one that counts cinema in their cultural roots and recognizes it as a definitive experience. A new kind of relentless detractor emerges: the mediocre journalist that accuses "literate" critics of "pedantry," of "gratuitous enmity against Mexican movies" and of imitation of *Cahiers du cinéma* (as if the famous French publication presented a uniform, reproducible model), or uses the coincidence that De La Colina, García Ascot, García Riera and Pina are all Spanish refugees, or children of refugees, to accuse the group's members of being "undesirable foreigners," "cheating rodents who bite the hand that feeds them."¹⁵

¹⁵ Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano* (1993), 296. Although Ayala Blanco appears to be quoting these attacks, he does not provide their source. According to Eduardo Mateo Gambarte, the last invective in the above passage came from poet Efraín Huerta, who at the time worked for the national distribution company *Películas Nacionales*. For more on *Nuevo Cine*'s detractors, see Gambarte, "Jomí García Ascot, la

One must wonder about Ayala Blanco's rejection of the comparison with *Cahiers*, for it is questionable whether the premise that the similarities are insulting holds true at all (he rejects it in terms of its inaccuracy, but rejecting it in the first place connotes that the comparison has been considered hurtful). The *Nuevo Cine* group was very receptive to the innovations of the French New Wave and alert to its filmmakers' critical texts. As some of *Nuevo Cine*'s members carried out their filmmaking plans, it is not absurd to believe they saw in the *Cahiers* crew a spiritual relative. Just as that journal's contributors wrote with immense brio, *Nuevo Cine*'s critics seemed to compose their essays and reviews with the clear belief that the beauty of their writing would distinguish their work. *Cahiers* alum Jean-Luc Godard claimed to make movies as if he were filming criticism,¹⁶ a conceit that, in its inversion, speculates that Godard thought of criticism as a form of filmmaking. Such approach partially accounts for how the levels of artistry in his writing and his films are comparable. Looking at many of the pieces on the pages of *Nuevo Cine*'s seven issues, it is tempting to conclude that Godard's conception of criticism also applied to the Mexican journal's team. Spotlighting the work of two of its core members, Asier Aranzubia reinforces the perception that these critics shared a sense that their writing had to accomplish a poetic effect:

It is not accidental that the prose stands out in a publication where the writing style is far above what tends to appear in critical circles. And I don't think it is necessary to remember that despite counting images and sounds as their object of study, words are film critics' expressive tools, which is why – as it happens with everyone who makes a living through the noble art of putting words together – looking after the quality of their writing is the critics' duty. As the young *Cahiers* critics also knew well, the success of their intervention depended largely on the effectiveness of their prose.¹⁷

That effectiveness, however, was more than the result of their individual talents or a strategic

crítica de cine y la revista *Nuevo Cine*" in *Cuadernos Iberoamericanos, Revista de Historia y Comunicación* 1 (2015): 50.

¹⁶ Quoted in Susan Sontag, *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 236.

¹⁷ Asier Aranzubia, "*Nuevo Cine* (1961-1962) y el nacimiento de la cultura cinematográfica mexicana moderna" in *Dimensión Antropológica* 18, no. 52 (2011): 118.

move to make sure people noticed their journal (in fact, Ayala Blanco's comments above evince that the writing style could have been something that alienated readers from *Nuevo Cine*). There are many differences between *Cahiers* and *Nuevo Cine* that make comparisons problematic; there are also surface likenesses, in that both were the print outlets for burgeoning (or at least intended) filmmaking careers, and featured writing invested in its pleasurable materiality. The difference that I want to unpack here resides in the latter concern. Christian Keathley and Robert Ray have argued that what fueled the *Cahiers* critics' "lyrical, discontinuous, epigrammatic flashes of subjectivity-cum-analysis" – their poetic investigations, in other words – was a recovery of the allure of cinema through a writing that was sensitive to and evocative of the world's sensuousness. The cinephile's passionate writing came from a surrealist, "irregular reobjectification"¹⁸ of objects, gestures, and other elements in a scene, which some filmmakers knew how to intensify. Cinema served as a reminder of the possibility of marvelous encounters with reality. On the other hand, *Nuevo Cine*, while also attentive to details and indebted to Surrealism, was more concerned with cinema's access to otherworldly visions (the enigmatic dimension from chapter 2.0), and responded to it with writing that strove to inhabit that phantomlike space. For some of its critics, the theoretical insight that film trains the viewers' visionary capacity peers through the desire to see in film the materialization of their dreams for both Mexican cinema and the (fantastic) memory of the country they left superimposed over the country they adopted. Something about film, and the films of the time, demanded cinema be written about this way – a new language had to be invented, and that language's striking sheen was both a necessity and a result of their exploration of film's power to ignite the imagination. The following sections describe how *Nuevo Cine*, in its limited run, showcased critical pieces

¹⁸ Bill Brown, "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)" in *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Summer 1998): 954.

that orbited around a conception of cinema's spectral nexus of displacement and creativity, with examples from the two critics that not only supplied the journal with some of its classic, oft-quoted essays, but who also made their own films: Salvador Elizondo and Jomí García Ascot.

3.1.3 Erotic *Poiesis* and *Nuevo Cine*'s Resident Surrealist

First, some remarks about the composition of the journal's creative team. The formation of *Nuevo Cine* gathered its initial momentum from the encounters of its future members at the *Cine Club de México* of the *Instituto Francés de América Latina* (French Institute of Latin America). There came together many of the members that would eventually become the journal's editors, occasional contributors, and supporters. Exiles Jomí García Ascot, José de la Colina and Emilio García Riera, and Mexican critics Gabriel Ramírez and Salvador Elizondo, comprised the writing and editorial staff. Joining them as the signatories in the group's manifesto were Rafael Corkidi, J.L. González de León, Heriberto Lafranchi, Carlos Monsiváis, Julio Pliego, José María Sbert, Luis Vicens, who occasionally supplied pieces for the journal. Other endorsers of the group included Pina, Paz (who galvanized his intellectual friends in France to advocate for Buñuel's *Los olvidados* when it played at Cannes), writer Jorge Ibarguengoitia (who penned a few reviews) and even Buñuel himself. De la Colina would later explain that the group made its most noticeable ripples among a highly literate cinephile culture, and not in the culture at large.¹⁹ The roster of literary luminaries it attracted is certainly indicative of the community with which the group resonated.

Despite and because of its prestige and even the involvement of reputed filmmakers, the journal was, from its inception, independent from the industry – unlike, say *Cine Mundial*, a

¹⁹ Quoted in Gambarte, "Jomí García Ascot," 49. Gambarte and Aranzubia give comprehensive but succinct accounts of the inception of *Nuevo Cine* – both the group and the journal.

magazine founded by Mexican film comedy superstar Mario Moreno *Cantinflas*. The print shop of *Librería Madero*, a still-in-business antique bookstore established by Republican refugee Tomás Espresate, produced the journal, which, for Gambarte, made up for the relatively low standard of its materials with the attractive graphic design of Vicente Rojo (another Spanish expatriate).²⁰ That independence was also crucial if they were to mount the revitalization of Mexican cinema that their manifesto demanded. Occupying the very first section of the journal's first issue, the manifesto called, in six points, for reforms to film industry labor laws that would allow independent filmmakers to produce their work; for the recognition of the filmmaker as an artist that should operate, like the painter, in an environment of creative freedom; for support for, in their view, historically underappreciated genres like documentary, experimental and short films, both in terms of production and exhibition; for the promotion of film education, which included the opening of a film school and a film archive, the proliferation of film clubs and specialized publications, and the facilitation of other avenues of research; and for increased contact with international cinema through festivals and regular exhibition of foreign films.²¹ The writers went about attempting to fulfill those goals, submitting *Nuevo Cine*, the journal, as their first step.

Which brings us to Salvador Elizondo (1932-2006), who authored the very first essay in the first issue of *Nuevo Cine* (April 1961). He was not a surprising presence in a film magazine, for cinema could be said to have been in his blood. Named after his father, the Mexican Golden Age producer behind hugely popular films like *Salón México* (1949) and *La dama del alba* (1950), Elizondo is best known today as a fiction writer, in particular for his award-winning novel *Farabeuf, o la crónica de un instante* (*Farabeuf or the Chronicle of an Instant*), first

²⁰ Gambarte, "Jomí García Ascot, la crítica de cine y la revista *Nuevo Cine*," 48.

²¹ José de la Colina et al., "Manifiesto del grupo *Nuevo Cine*," 1.

published in 1965, still in print today and translated to English in 2015. He is yet another case, familiar from this study, of a writer that took flight into literature from the springboard of film criticism. One of the Mexican-born members of *Nuevo Cine*, he is also one of its most cosmopolitan. Educated in Cambridge and the *Institut de Hautes Études Cinématographiques*, Elizondo's experimental writing feeds from the influences that the geography of his higher education suggests – *Farabeuf* transforms the author's fascination with the surgery handbooks of a legendary nineteenth century French physician into a fantastically fictionalized biography of the latter, who plies his trade in the book between sexual encounters and duties as an intelligence agent in China. His writing has a globetrotting gaze more insistently international in its scope than that of those fellow critics at *Nuevo Cine* who would also practice fiction and poetry, perhaps because, unlike Elizondo's education abroad, their own exilic status was not motivated mainly by their own edification. In his literature, Elizondo tended to look outwards. Regarding cinema, Elizondo's second book is a critical study of the films of Luchino Visconti.

It is ironic, then, that his inaugural essay is one of the very few items in *Nuevo Cine* that converses directly and extensively with the history and themes of Mexican cinema. For all their hopes, *Nuevo Cine* displayed disinterest, when not contempt, for Mexican films, something García Riera would later consider one of the journal's failings. It made sense, however, to start out with a plea to end some of the more insidious tendencies of Mexican film production. Under the title "*Moral sexual y moraleja en el cine mexicano*" ("Sexual Morals and Moral Lessons in Mexican Cinema"), Elizondo's essay is largely a diatribe against the hypocritical, repressive treatment of sexuality and erotic desire in Mexican film. But it is also a mission statement, for Elizondo expounds here on the approach to eroticism that would animate his best-known literary work, one indebted to the European avant-garde that inevitably informed his understanding of

film. Bookending his work for *Nuevo Cine* is his essay “*Luis Buñuel, un visionario*,” (“Luis Buñuel, a Visionary”), again the opening piece of the last, special issue of the journal, dedicated entirely to the Spanish surrealist filmmaker. Read together, both essays illuminate the contours of Elizondo’s surrealist ethos, nurtured in the writings of Georges Bataille²² and Buñuel’s cinema. They also attest how Elizondo situated and enacted cinema’s allure for the literary imagination, as his career traveled from *Nuevo Cine* to film, poetry, and fiction. In his film criticism, Elizondo stated his surrealist interest in eroticism and would later articulate it multiple times in his narrative fiction which, in turn, would also exude Elizondo’s believe in cinema’s power to stage a poetic victory over the isolated discontinuity of the self in the forms of love and solidarity – another version, if you will, of the desire for an openness to futurity that film’s spectrality made possible. His criticism of Buñuel and eroticism in film presents an account of how cinema inspires poetic writing through two qualities: its erotic ability to create visions that open the self to the world, and a cosmopolitanism that, in the context of exilic writing and filmmaking that birthed *Nuevo Cine*, appears immanent to the medium.

I will begin delineating Elizondo’s pathways into poetic inquiry by describing both “*Moral sexual y moraleja*” and “*Luis Buñuel, un visionario*” in detail. The former makes its allegiances clear from the start, in a mixture of artful verbosity and bluntness that immediately takes aim at Mexican film and lays out his definition of the erotic:

Ultimately, morals are but the account of two perfectly defined attitudes: man’s attitude toward his peers and towards women (or woman’s attitude towards men). When this account becomes exegesis and interpretation, morals become sociology, and when they are generalized to teach a lesson, we are talking about having a moral to a story. Morals, as surrealism demonstrated well, are the poets’ heritage; their generalization is the concern of researches and historians, if not apologists, and moral lessons are the instrument that replaces the incompetence of the inept, the inexhaustible top hat from

²² For an account of the Bataille-influenced sense of the erotic in Elizondo’s work, see Dulce Aguirre, “El erotismo en *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante*, de Salvador Elizondo” in *Crítica.cl*, December 28th, 2010, <http://critica.cl/literatura/el-erotismo-en-farabeuf-o-la-cronica-de-un-instante-1965-de-salvador-elizondo>

which deceivers never get tired of pulling the rabbit of their own nonsense. The two aforementioned attitudes move between two poles of the human spirit: solidarity and love, whose only legitimate manifestations are rebellion and sexual experience.²³

The last sentence, in its interrelation of violence (rebellion), sexuality, and solidarity, recalls Bataille's claims surrounding eroticism and death. "A violent death," writes Bataille, "disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one."²⁴ A series of disruptions, of openings of that segregating discontinuity is thus initiated, where death "opens the way to the denial of our individual lives" and "[e]roticism opens the way to death."²⁵ For Elizondo, solidarity and sexuality represent the surpassing of the isolating boundaries of inner experience (the breaking of an individual's frame, as it were) and an actual connection with fellow humans and the world. But Mexican cinema seemed, at the time, uninterested in truly exploring love and solidarity. Instead, he laments his observation that Mexican film had devolved into a factory of only message movies, or with a lesson in the end that was almost always condemnatory of expressions of erotic longing. Elizondo traces the moral shaming back, in part, to the *petit bourgeois* values of the union members who controlled national film production. Cinema's function, in his eyes, is not to condemn. True moral cinema, one that grapples with genuine solidarity and how it is prevented or promoted, is one that "*justifies* human acts that hypocrisy insists on damning. When a film moralizes, it is generalizing, teaching a lesson, and at that moment it becomes ineffective. When it justifies, it contributes to creation, to the augmentation of the universe."²⁶ That is why, he says, morals are the poets' heritage.²⁷ This time, Elizondo echoes Buñuel, who spoke of poetry in cinema as something that "completes and

²³ Salvador Elizondo, "Moral sexual y moraleja en el cine mexicano" in *Nuevo Cine* 1 (April 1961): 4.

²⁴ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ Elizondo, "Moral sexual," 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

enlarges tangible reality” in a lecture he delivered at the National University in Mexico City in 1958 – one that Elizondo very likely attended – titled “Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry.”²⁸ Elizondo suggests that poetry in film means staging images that make visible and accessible the variety and extent of human desires so viewers can regard them as indeed human, hence increasing viewers’ knowledge of each other and, in the process, eliminating obstacles to fellowship. (Elizondo would further explain what staging such images looks like in his later article on Buñuel, which I will examine shortly). In other words, poetry shapes morals. By contrast, Mexican cinema had not dedicated itself to enhancing fellowship but, rather, to impede it in the repeated championing of conventional attitudes toward the erotic and the suppression of subversive ones.

The central figure in that suppression, and a key character in Elizondo’s history of Mexican cinema, is the prostitute. He charts the history of sexual mores in Mexican film through its behavior toward prostitution. The phenomenon to which he responds is “the idealization, through moralizing, of the prostitute, that irresistibly attractive and yet forbidden being; an inaccessible world where the beast of dreams forages; it is idealized because it is inaccessible, and it is inaccessible because it is idealized.”²⁹ Like he does with the rabbit-in-the-hat in the above passage, Elizondo adds an image that, in this case, can be as vivid as it is disconcerting, in order to describe Mexican cinema’s visions of the prostitute: “The apocalyptic character straddling the Babylonian beast, so dear to William Blake, disperses in multiple fragments. A gamut of poetic characters consoles in the meanders of the being-in-solitude.”³⁰ The reference to the Whore of Babylon, and particularly its Blakean variety, serves Elizondo to illustrate how

²⁸ Luis Buñuel, “Cinema as an Instrument of Poetry” in *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, trans. Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 140.

²⁹ Elizondo, “Moral sexual,” 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Mexican films tended to see every female sex worker as a different face of the same mythically proportioned woman, resulting in a series of fictional women whose role is to cure loneliness even if they are certain to bring about the characters' doom.³¹ The ambivalence toward the whore is counterbalanced, in Elizondo's account, by the figure of the mother ("*madre*, the fundamental word in Mexican speech"). The mother in this conception "slices through all femininity, from Coatlicue to the Tepeyac"³² (that is, through every cultural image of women and throughout the Mexican territory). So, "the horror of the mother pushes us ever so furiously into the arms of the whore, who in turn is, almost always, a failed mother."³³ The mother and the prostitute are the "two poles between which Mexican films oscillate"³⁴ to create highly successful commercial formulas, all of which obstruct solidarity in their treatment of those versions of femininity, one a denial of eroticism, the other its ultimately destructive, forbidden appeal.

The ideological and thematic limitations of Mexican cinema's erotic purview reveal themselves, for Elizondo, in the fact that two adaptations of Federico Gamboa's novel *Santa* (1903) kickstarted two eras of early Mexican cinema. A 1918 silent version was the product of a prototypical industrial model, while the 1932 version, scripted by Bonifant's mentor Noriega Hope, was the first Mexican film with synchronized sound. Perhaps the most celebrated novel of Mexican Naturalism, it tells the story of the eponymous woman, who is driven into prostitution, and then rejected and punished for it. It rises to the rank of paradigmatic text because of the symmetry that, for Elizondo, runs deep in Mexican film: a disease-stricken Santa's final request

³¹ See Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 148 on the place of female sexuality in Blake's work. It is unclear if Elizondo sees in Blake's watercolor *The Whore of Babylon* a view of sexuality that is just as contradictory as the one he underlines in Mexican film. According to Goldsmith, "[t]hat Blake's representation of apocalypse is organized by and centered on the female sex is as startling as it is paradoxical."

³² Elizondo, "Moral sexual..." 5. Coatlicue is the deity that mothered the major *mexica* gods and, thus, became the archetypal Mother in Mexican popular culture. Tepeyac refers to Tepeyac Hill, the Northernmost tip of Mexico City at the intersection of the Sierra Madres and a place of Aztec worship.

³³ Elizondo, "Moral sexual..." 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

to his lover is that he bury her next to her mother. From her grave, Elizondo raises her spirit to define four categories of Mexican films dealing with the possibilities of love and solidarity, two of which revolve around specific kinds of prostitution. The first category, which we have covered, are films about professional prostitution, followed by “films about marital and social prostitution,”³⁵ in which the sexual transgression remits to the erotic temptation of the prostitute and, in its tragic results in the films’ stories, aims at protecting the institutions of marriage, family, and chastity. These extremely successful films, like *Esposa o amante* (*Wife or Lover*, 1960), *Tu hijo debe nacer*, (*Your Son Must Be Born*, 1958), and *¿Con quién andan nuestras hijas?* (*Who Dates Our Daughters*, 1956), as the titles all denote, rage against adultery, abortion and pre-marital sex. The third category concerns “films with erotic content,”³⁶ which make gestures toward a fruitful eroticism but are, nevertheless, irreparably timid. Elizondo commends, for instance, the work of Emilio Fernández, but thinks his *La red* (1953), despite its formal beauty, could not escape moral didacticism or obvious sexual symbolism (like scenes where the female protagonist washes her lover’s shirt, or where she observes him while she drinks from a coconut).³⁷

The final category belongs entirely to Buñuel. And here, Elizondo’s writing experiences a certain breakdown. For the first time, but not the last (the same will happen in the later piece “Luis Buñuel, a Visionary”), Elizondo resists reading Buñuel’s films beyond a general statement about their rebellion against moral lessons and the fact that they achieve their deeply moral erotic quality through their poetry:

³⁵ Elizondo, “Moral sexual,” 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ Incidentally, Bazin admired Fernández’ lensing of these very moments, which he praised for their innocence and chastity. Elizondo and Bazin might have agreed on the effect of Fernández’s choices, but disagreed on the value of that effect. See Gustavo Arturo de Alba. “*La Red* y Rossana Podestá” in *Cineforever*. Dec. 7th, 2007. Viewed on April 17th, 2015. <http://www.cineforever.com/2007/12/07/la-red-y-rossana-podesta/>

The primordial relation between humans is love, not family, race or nationality. This love as the principle of solidarity – let us call it “intersexual” – can only manifest itself as contact, as sexual proximity, even as an abandon that tends to set free what is contained and to create a balance of repressed emotions. Poetry is a way to jump over the barriers that the censors’ stupidity imposes on the inveterate messages of the rebel. Buñuel, nourished in an environment of poets who took ownership of morals, knows how to climb over that barrier. Let us understand this properly: Surrealism was, above all, a movement, if not of moral reform, at least of moral subversion. In that resides the force that made it the last spurt of artistic solidarity.³⁸

Elizondo stops short of detailing how Buñuel’s films elude censorship, suggesting that psychoanalytic and theological readings of films like *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) and *Nazarín* (1959) would not do them justice, and indicating proper accounts for them are still waiting to be written. He follows a line through Buñuel’s films that goes from satirizing the erotic repression of bourgeois society to an urgent call for social solidarity. The piece cites *Los olvidados* as a film that avoids the general, inept moral lesson through its insistence on protest.³⁹

Let us note that *Los olvidados* is perhaps the film of Buñuel’s that skirts closest to the message movie’s shortsighted finger-wagging. Starting from the egg smashing against the camera lens that serves as a shockingly comical demand for attention and clarity of vision, a central sequence where the head of a youth detention center trusts the captive Pedro (Alfonso Mejía) with money chooses actualization over condemnation of the delinquent child. But Hernán Medina Jiménez rightly alerts us to the nakedly didactic and paternalistic nature of the scene, and how watching it through the social and racial prisms informing it exposes the pedagogical bent of the Spanish diaspora over a Mexican character they assessed without historical specificity. The attempt at rehabilitating Pedro that Elizondo sees as “moral protest” and an exhortation to social solidarity (assuming that is the sequence to which he refers) seems to be yet another legitimization of the former colonial power’s sense of what urban modernity must mean. It is

³⁸ Elizondo, “Moral sexual...” 10.

³⁹ Ibid.

also prudent to note what other characters are excluded from the scene: “For Buñuel, therefore, the cinematic construction of a new subaltern subject implies, above all, the presence of a State – the police, the Minors Court, the school – as guardian of culture in a society that does not include the indigenous subject (‘Ojitos’) or the mestizo subject (‘el Jaibo’).”⁴⁰ Elizondo never appears critical toward Buñuel, which could be seen as symptomatic not only of what Aranzubia refers to as the “auteurist excesses”⁴¹ that at times overwhelmed the *Cahiers* writers’ work, but also of the way *Nuevo Cine*’s cultural make up was out of touch with certain Mexican realities.

Elizondo’s subject, however, is eroticism, and there are scenes in *Los olvidados* that successfully vanquish *moreleja* over a humanistic impulse through their focus and handling of the erotic. Elizondo might be speaking of how *Los olvidados* treats the characters’ sexuality. In crafting a dream sequence that, in its hallucinatory viscerality, pushes symbolism into feral concreteness, Buñuel externalizes Pedro’s incestuous thoughts of her mother – she approaches him, in his slumber, holding a piece of raw meat that appears to sensually disintegrate in her hands. The hunger is both digestive and sexual. In this scene, the film might be activating the kind of justification of eroticism that Elizondo wanted to see more frequently displayed. Pedro’s desires are acknowledged with complexity and a strange, non-judgmental beauty rarely afforded its marginal characters or to sexual taboo in Mexican cinema. Further explaining Elizondo’s impressionable, even naïve admiration of Buñuel, there is also the matter of cultural expediency by which a text like *Los olvidados* serves a country’s cosmopolitan intellectuals to push their local cinema into a dominant Western globality. In yet another system of intentional and potential betrayals of a culture’s particularity in order to forge equality with the hegemons,

⁴⁰ Hernán Medina Jiménez, “Pedagogía, subalternidad y *fatum* en *Los olvidados*” in *A Contra corriente* 11, no. 2, (Winter 2014): 223.

⁴¹ Aranzubia, “*Nuevo Cine...*” 115. Despite the Buñuel near-worship, Aranzubia argues that *Nuevo Cine*’s critics were “more Bazinian than Cahierists” – that is, their fandom was not so deeply auteurist.

Elizondo completely endorses Buñuel within the pages of a journal steeped in European worldviews to champion Mexican film. While I will further discuss the ambivalence of the legacy of Spanish Republican exiles in Mexican culture, or the unavoidable paradox of attempting to usher a new cinematic culture from an (apparent) outside, my study offers how, in Elizondo's writing, eroticism is not only a theme demanding greater attention from Mexican filmmakers, but also the organizing principle in cinema's capacity to generate both visions and literary invention.

The latter ability emerges in Elizondo's later, final piece for *Nuevo Cine*, "*Luis Buñuel, un visionario.*" After arguing for the moral depths of Buñuel's images in contrast to Mexican film's penchant for anti-erotic preaching, Elizondo embarks on a more specific reflection on Buñuel's aesthetic. It is there that shades of his association of the erotic and cinema become more palpable. It is also where his writing more explicitly reaches epigrammatic levels, recognizing that poetic investigation is the approach Buñuel's work calls forth. He begins explaining the title, where Buñuel is a visionary not because he is a "utopianist" or "clairvoyant," but because he literally "sees visions... and by extension: he sees more of reality by departing from it."⁴² Elizondo stresses he will not even try to rationalize those visions, for that would betray himself and Buñuel. The disavowal of rational approaches to Buñuel is part of the rigor of poetic investigation, but it is also how he asserts the undeniability of Buñuel's images. They carry such weight because, in his view, they cannot be spoken of in terms of style – at least in the way, he says, one can speak of style in the films of Bresson or Eisenstein, where choices in framing, pacing and camera movement insist in reappearing throughout these directors' careers and follow the logic of the waking world. By contrast, Buñuel was "faithful to dream's truth, becoming a 'producer of visions.' More than any other filmmaker of this kind, Buñuel is the one

⁴² Salvador Elizondo, "Luis Buñuel, un visionario" in *Nuevo Cine* 4-5 (November 1961): 2.

who has tapped the largest heritage of sensible data to make of poetic vision an everyday experience.”⁴³ In fact, Elizondo speaks of Buñuel not unlike Bazin does. As Keathley observes, “Bazin championed Buñuel because he believed the director’s sensibility emerged not through manipulation of the world, but through acute observation of it.”⁴⁴ Elizondo largely agrees: “Far from enlisting the aid of synthetic widgets and accessories... Buñuel has known how to find in quotidian reality, in the stage set of life, in the masks that are the faces of all men, the untestable truth of poetry.”⁴⁵ If Buñuel had a “style,” he would be adding something to reality (in Bazin’s words) rather than discovering its “miraculous substratum;”⁴⁶ he would be working on surface relationships of cause-and-effect instead of the permanent sub-level of consciousness. In other words, Elizondo explains that Buñuel’s images help form what Tom Stoppard calls “the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgments about the world.”⁴⁷

I take this to be Elizondo’s way of grappling with Buñuel’s attentive but unhurried camerawork, which is indeed classical (even if it will often pointedly toy with its conventions) and arguably unassuming. Somehow, Buñuel’s “styleless” style pushes past representation and into giving images an immanent presence, which bears on the viewer’s sense of the diversity of humanity’s desires. The only kind of image to which Elizondo believes Buñuel’s visions can compare, because of their architectural, moral-world-building quality, are emblems:

Emblems. Here is the ultimate root of Buñuel’s vision. The panorama of Baroque poetry – Góngora, Marini, Crashaw – passes onto us but the emblems that make up the signs through which vision transcends. The heart with eyes, the heart in flames, the arrow-tongued angel, do these not correspond to the emblems of Pierre Batchef’s face patterned with blood lines, or the heroine of *L’age d’or* frantically kissing a statue’s feet while a spectral orchestra... plays Wagner music in the background; Arturo de Córdoba

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 64.

⁴⁵ Elizondo, “Luis Buñuel...” 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁷ Tom Stoppard, *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, ed. Paul Delaney (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 66.

symbolically masturbating the bars under a handrail; nuns falling into an elevator shaft; Nazarín's pineapple; the crucifix that becomes a dagger; the most fabulous sexual gadget in Latin America: Lilia Prado's legs in *Subida al cielo* [sic]... all of the above, and many more, constitute the *Emblemata* of our current visionary.⁴⁸

The above excerpt – which references *Un chien andalou* (1929), *Él* (1953), *Ensayo de un crimen* (1955) and *Viridiana* (1961), in that order, in addition to the films mentioned by title – fulfills a number of important functions. It ties Buñuel's cinema to Baroque literature and culture and thus, potentially, to a counter-imperial aesthetic; it depicts emblems as assemblages: the heart with eyes, the heart in flames, and the rest are all images made of disparate pieces; the passage is, in itself, an aggregate, the kind of listing so favored for *Cahiers* critics like Godard, who did it in his criticism and, most monumentally, in his video essay *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989-1999; about the latter, it recalls the famous “Master of the Universe” sequence about Hitchcock, where Godard lists the objects in films whose control enabled Hitchcock's world domination). It is, in other words, a montage in print, juxtaposing images from Baroque poetry with others from across Buñuel's filmography; finally, Elizondo makes a case for criticism like his own, for written thoughts, in the form of epigrams (understood as poetic inscriptions) often accompanied the visual pedagogy of the original emblems.⁴⁹ Elizondo peppers the piece with his own emblems, taking a still from a Buñuel film and captioning it with his own epigrammatic inscriptions, which come from the body of the essay. Film and criticism are brought together in emblematic form.

The idea of emblems as assemblages is the key aspect of Elizondo's implied theory of cinema. For as much as he sublimates the idea of style when it comes to Buñuel's films, a figure does emerge when thinking of the practicalities of creating emblems: Eisenstein. Despite his

⁴⁸ Elizondo, “Luis Buñuel...” 5-6.

⁴⁹ See Denis Drysdall, *Claude Mignault of Dijon. Theoretical Writings on the Emblem: a Critical Edition* (an annotated version of the 1577 text), January 20th, 2016, http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/Mignault_intro.html

previous statement calling the Soviet filmmaker's work more manipulative and artificial (and thus, by implication, less powerful) than Buñuel's, it is Eisenstein's theories that finally prevail in Elizondo's own writing and filmmaking. For emblems, in their combinations of elements, obey a principle of montage, which Elizondo understands as a fundamentally erotic process in which discontinuous entities (beings separated by their bodies' boundaries) become continuous with one another, and where new visions are indeed added to reality in order to make it grow richer. Besides envisioning a Mexican cinema that throws itself into legitimizing multiple relationalities and emancipating diverse expressions of love, Elizondo foregrounds cinema's connection to the erotic far beyond the level of thematic concern, all the way into its constitutive parts. For him, montage itself is an activity dedicated to the Batailleian, erotic rupture of semiotic and bodily fragmentations. As he transformed the knowledge of film criticism into a literary career, Elizondo carried cinematic montage over to his prose to conjure up images of his own. This is never clearer than in *Farabeuf*, Elizondo's novel whose subtitle, we will remember, is "the chronicle of an instant." Through its pages, simultaneous events collide around a single moment that, only in hindsight, acquires cumulative significance – the observation of a photograph where a man suffers the *Leng Tch'é*' torment, a Chinese form capital dismemberment reserved for assassins. *Farabeuf*'s tale of surgery, amputation, photographic framing, sex and death presents the erotic openness of its many organisms to create images through montage. José Francisco Robles is one of many critics who have uncovered *Farabeuf*'s debt to Eisenstein and his idea of film ontology, and how it is deployed for erotic purposes:

We discover in *Farabeuf*'s narrative structure its analogy with cinematic narrative, a question evidenced in the innumerable metonymies that deepen a true "post" of images and narratological positions. The fragment seduces the narrative structure as distinct voices speak within it, mixing together, weaving a net of metadiegeses that allow broad readings to discover in montage their constitutive principle. The novel's polyphony proposes this montage as the parallel coexistence of diverse voices, insofar as each voice

is a different source that enables a discontinuous approach to reading that eroticizes the act of reading itself.⁵⁰

By editing together overlapping voices around an instant, Elizondo stops and expands time. “He thus follows precepts derived from... Eisenstein’s theory of montage, itself derived from multiple cultural references, among them Chinese calligraphy, a discipline in which Elizondo himself also dabbled.”⁵¹ But he also fragments the novel so that the reader has different openings into it. Cinematic montage hence aids the viewer/reader herself in becoming continuous with the text, promoting imaginative responses. See the passage below:

Anguish takes you over when you look at that photograph, the way you do every afternoon until your pulse quickens and you begin to gasp. Your breath is in a similar ecstasy and would like to see yourself naked, tied to the stake. You’d like to feel the edge of those knives, the exceedingly sharp points of those bamboo sticks, slowly penetrating your flesh. You would like to feel the warm trickle of blood streams over your thighs, would you not?⁵²

The overt eroticism of montage is exacerbated by the fact that the inspiration of desire is a photograph, a framed image of a Chinese torture victim that fascinates the characters. Images of sectioned bodies blend with the process of framing and editing, the many ways in which the matter of cinema (celluloid at the time, but also the images themselves) both divides the world and is itself divided. The erotic processes of cutting flesh, film, and the world through the frame produces further acts of imagination that can result in a poetic, erotic gushing of language. In its coming into being through montage, a cinematic text about eroticism also erotically inspires fantasy and its inventive expressions.

⁵⁰ José Francisco Robles, “El instante fractal en *Farabeuf*, de Salvador Elizondo” en *Revista de la Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades*, Universidad de Chile, Fall of 2003, www.cyberhumanitatis.uchile.cl/CDA/texto_simple2/0,1255,SC...%2526ISID%253D287,00.html

⁵¹ Arturo Garmendia, “Salvador Elizondo Cinema snob” in *Cineforever*, December 11th, 2010, <http://www.cineforever.com/2010/12/11/salvador-elizondo-cinema-snob/>

⁵² Salvador Elizondo, *Farabeuf, o la crónica de un instante* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 35.

Farabeuf's delirious montage is a compendium of Elizondo's artistic and scientific obsessions, but it was not complete. While it was already cinematic, Elizondo's surrealism found its way into film, a step toward fulfilling one of *Nuevo Cine's* goals. 1965, the year his first and only novel saw publication, was also the date of the first screening of his short film (twenty-five minutes) *Apocalypse 1900*, in which Dr. L. H. Farabeuf, the surgeon, also makes an appearance. The film is composed entirely – except for one significant instance – of stills of engravings from both Farabeuf's *Précis de manuel opératoire* (1889), the very same handbook that inspired the novel – as if the film were giving a glimpse into the novel's creative process – and *La Nature*, a popular science magazine (now the monthly *La Recherche*) also from the late nineteenth century.⁵³ *Apocalypse 1900* is not an adaptation of *Farabeuf*, but an audiovisual sibling in Surrealism and, indeed, an interestingly non-linear manifestation of the ideas about poetic images from his criticism. It was produced by Elizondo's then wife Michèle Albán and José Luis González de León. It was perhaps the first attempt from *Nuevo Cine's* writers to alter the Mexican cinematic scene to flame out: disagreements between Elizondo and González de León prevented the film from being finished before the submission deadline for the Avignon Film Festival. It was instead screened once at the French Institute of Latin America, and it was largely forgotten until filmmaker and editor Gerardo Villegas rescued and digitized it for a new screening in the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in 2007 (about a year after Elizondo's death).⁵⁴ The short consists of a succession of the motionless engravings, edited together to the changing rhythms of several melodies, and with the oblique commentary of voice-over readings of both original dialogue and the works of assorted writers (Baudelaire, Sue, Lautrémont, Bataille,

⁵³ José Antonio Manzanilla Madrid, "Apocalypse 1900: Una película de Salvador Elizondo" in *Literal*, June 9th, 2015, <http://literalmagazine.com/apocalypse-1900-una-pelicula-de-salvador-elizondo/>

⁵⁴ Villegas also produced and directed the documentary *El extraño experimento del profesor Elizondo* (*The Strange Experiment of Professor Elizondo*, 2007), which follows the recovery of *Apocalypse 1900*.

Breton and Cocteau).⁵⁵ Buñuel and Elizondo himself, among others, speak the dialogue in French, with Spanish subtitles (the intertitles and credits, however, were also in French, with one announcing that *Apocalypse 1900* is “*un film mexicain*”).

It would be possible to consider the film Elizondo’s hybrid of Buñuel and Eisenstein, his own attempt at crafting emblems through montage. Even the soundtrack supports the connection to Buñuel, since it first throbs with the notes of Wagner’s *Liebestod* from *Tristan and Isolde*, the same piece that scored *Un chien andalou* alongside its catchy tango. But *Apocalypse 1900* soon recalls Chris Marker’s *La jetée* (1962), in its telling, through still images and voice-over, of a cataclysmic tale. The engravings parade in fairly distinct movements. The sequence goes like this: marvels of transportation technology; idle afternoons among society ladies; naked, dancing, writhing women; luxuriously obsessive pictures of surgical procedures (often focusing on the head and the skull); early telephone systems; astronomical phenomena and the apparatus for its observation; almost fantastical renderings of inhospitable nature, flora and fauna; emaciated bodies; devastated cities and barren landscapes with a few human figures left to roam them. Affectively, the film moves from optimism at scientific progress; to amorous leisure through sexual and medical imagery; to a certain *ennui* at the realization that “everything has been invented” (an oft repeated line); to the alarming news of the end of the world through an unknown, but possibly cosmic, catastrophe (all conveyed through what appear to be phone calls); to the horror of famine and destruction; and finally to the nostalgia of contemplating desolation. There are no characters, just the voices of an anonymous, French-speaking collectivity.

The sequence quickly announces Elizondo’s Bataillean eroticism. Placing the images of nude feminine bodies right next to the engravings of dissected ones (difficult to identify by gender) presses the erotic charge of death and dismemberment. The use of words with images is

⁵⁵ Manzanilla Madrid, “*Apocalypse 1900*.”

classically emblematic. But this is not a film made out of the observation of quotidian detail that produced Buñuel's visions, but a collage of re-purposed, human-made depictions of the world. Downplaying cinema as a device for the mechanical reproduction of reality (we get drawings, not photographs) and setting the film, through the title (in addition to title cards) at the turn of the twentieth century, the film recalls pre-cinematic spectacles like the phantasmagoria. The handling of sound compounds the ghostly feeling by denying suture: the sound's sources are never visible on screen. It appears Elizondo has chosen a different route toward creating visions by literally making apparitions out of his material. Choosing images of scientific provenance and coaxing them to visualize an end-of-the-world scenario gives pictures of the *Belle Époque*'s rational wonders a paradoxical shadow. In trying to capture modernity's marvels, the engravings also composed future terrors, an unconscious trace of contradictory feelings toward advancement. In the engravings, their authors left both a record of invention and envisioned prophecies of destruction. Awe and death are once again portrayed as inseparable. It is important to note, however, that in keeping with his ethos, the implied modern, Western humanity of the film is not punished for its desires. Instead, as I will argue below, the punishment comes from a failure to embrace that desire fully, or at least to identify it. Still, the origin of the disaster remains unexplained.

Yet by animating the engravings through film, Elizondo recovers another principle at the heart of cinema: the progression of still images to create illusory movement. Moreover, because it digs up visions of doom from its found engravings by committing them to celluloid, *Apocalypse 1900* becomes a documentary of visions, a record of imaginative flights of fancy rather than the generation of them through more conventionally photographic and cinematic means (like Buñuel does). But photography does appear in the one instance of footage reuse, and

it is an intriguing case. In the final sequence of *Apocalypse 1900*, Elizondo intercuts stills from the end of Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960), in which Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and Paola (Valeria Ciangottini) exchange friendly looks of incomprehension on the beach right after the encounter with the netted sea monster, with engravings of a marine creature that replaces the one in Fellini's film. Invoking *La dolce vita* is jarring because the viewer sees, for the first time in *Apocalypse 1900*, what was originally a photographic image, and because the faces (international star Mastroianni's, at least) and even the scene, could have been eminently recognizable to viewers. But Elizondo adds the sea creature as an engraving even when there is an actual monstrous fish in Fellini's movie, tying that landmark, era-defining film with the late-nineteenth century slideshow of technical portents. The placement reinforces the suspicion that Elizondo wishes to draw a parallel between the *Belle Époque* and the 1960s (near the height of the Cold War), marking the latter as another moment where a latent eschatological awareness, born out of a vindication of multiple forms of erotic desire, could have created the conditions for a working-through of large-scale trauma.

Note that the crisis to be averted is not the destruction itself, but the isolation in the aftermath. *Apocalypse 1900* might suggest there was something in the images that foretold the calamity, but not that such knowledge would have stopped it. I do see a potential issue with that inference. Elizondo's Surrealism and its *fin-de-siècle* setting could be a clue that the calamity in the film is a reference to World War I, a conflict that was human-wrought and therefore not disconnected from human agency the way a natural disaster might be. European avant-garde movements of the twenties (Surrealism among them) would blame the extreme, positivist infatuation with technology and reason for the battle. The film resists those conclusions, in my view, for two reasons: one, Elizondo is not interested in films with conventional causality and,

therefore, his short remains ambiguous on that subject. Just as the logic governing the order of the engravings' phantasmagoria rarely follows visible causal relationships (sparking, instead, metonymic and poetic associations that one is tempted to call surrealistically automatic), the narrative provides no sequence of events leading to the disaster. Two, the director's interest in the erotic directs our attention to a problem other than widespread ruin. The central tragedy becomes, instead, the inability of the survivors to remain, mourn and, potentially, reconstruct their world together – a return, by Elizondo, to the erotic practice of solidarity. The film ends with voices whispering “to flee,” and engravings of vessels and bodies in motion alternated with others of volcanoes and fires to convey a communal flight from danger, after which some people are left behind, standing alone at the seashore or at the edges of craters. The final image, of a lone figure on a cliff above a lake, starts from a close-up of the lonely man and pulls back to take in the entire, deserted landscape, a dwarfing that intensifies the bitterness of alienation among humans at a time when proximity is vital. *Apocalypse 1900* quotes Fellini's critique to emphasize the problem of solidarity. *La dolce vita*'s story attacks the detached, bacchanalian lifestyle of its *bon vivants* for its spiritual hollowness, a reading of the film that Elizondo might have expected viewers to share, particularly in its ambiguous dénouement. The unusual arrival of the monster, a singular vision that irrupts into the characters' comfort with their knowledge of the world, catalyzes a moment of potential connection for Marcello with Paola. The marine herald from another world ignites an anamnesis to the presence of others, to which Marcello does not entirely give himself, preferring to return to his empathetically-bankrupt milieu. Elizondo proposes that the engravers of *La Nature* had already seen Fellini's sea monster, and while they had the elements to claim all the implications of their fetishes, they instead failed to coalesce in the supportive, humanistic forms of eroticism when they might have been needed most. They were

flawed visionaries. Elizondo recuperates their visions, phantoms of harsh futures, to recover their amatory and communal significance.

Elizondo might have selected his approach for a number of possibilities, most likely in combination: budgetary constraints, an aesthetic choice of his moment in the history of experimental cinema and literature, or perhaps even an admission that rather than aping his hero Buñuel, he would have better luck working with available images rather than actors and a crew to stage dramatic scenes and set pieces. A love of the period likely played an enormous part, for there is something of a late-nineteenth-century European scientist in Elizondo. He would return to that era to articulate his own cinematically driven vision of poetic investigation. After his career internalized and transmuted the inspiration of cinema into literary *sinthomes*, he even wrote his own version of a tale of a mad genius and his spectral projection machine, like those in Quiroga and Bioy Casares' tales. In the short story "*Anapoyesis*," from his singular book *Camera lucida* (1983), Elizondo recounts the fable of Professor Pierre Emile Aubanel, who has built a machine that reads a poem and releases the energy of the creativity spent in its composition. In a great tradition of fantasy short fiction, Prof. Aubanel invites the unnamed narrator to witness the machine, named *anapoyetrón* (a "reproducer of creation"), at work. The two convene at Aubanel's residence, which happens to be the house where celebrated late-nineteenth-century writer and proponent of poetic inquiry Stéphane Mallarmé once lived. The professor seeks to extract the power of Mallarmé's inventiveness from his writings. He explains its mechanism from a thermodynamic perspective in the following dialogue:

"A poem's mass," Aubanel continued, "is like the mass of a battleship or an apple; that depends on the poem. The battleship is the real and potential expression of a certain amount of energy that becomes or can be transmitted in the shape of a battleship; an apple transforms into energy when we eat it, it reanimates us, gives us strength, as they say: it gives us *its* strength, which we change and assimilate. A poem is no more than a capsule that contains the energy that gives it life..."

“Do you mean to say, Professor Aubanel, that you intend to measure a poem’s mass?”

“In way, yes; but that is not my main objective. In fact, that is more the business of literary criticism. What interests me is the possibility of reversing the process by which the poet’s energy gathers into the poem.”⁵⁶

Aubanel lays out his plan in a fantasy of alternative energy: “Imagine the enormous riches contained in the poetic legacy of nations. Energy is the greatest wealth a people can have. Imagine the Italian economy powered with the energy stored in the *Divine Comedy*.”⁵⁷ But soon the narrator intuits another set of intentions. Aubanel has taken residence at Mallarmé’s home to channel the latter’s presence into the experiment. After Aubanel restates his goal of catching a poem when it “abandons the sublime poet’s pen as unpolluted, total energy, in the pure state in which the poet captures and locks it into a hermetic capsule that only the *anapoyetrón* can reopen and transform into energy, luxury, calm, voluptuousness,”⁵⁸ the narrator notices an empty chair in the room near the *anapoyetrón*, conspicuously placed but unoccupied. The story implies that, in his attempts at capturing the power he theorizes exists in the composition of a poem, Aubanel is really trying to resurrect Mallarmé – to have the poet materialize when the life force he put in his poems reverts to imaginative vitality. And to further elucidate his project, Aubanel turns to familiar imagery: “The *anapoyetrón* functions like a film camera operating in reverse. Once the poem is translated to energetic code, the instrument converts or transduces that code into energy; *anapoyesis* happens.”⁵⁹ The experiment does not succeed, alas, but the dynamic comes through. Aubanel asks the narrator to think of the extraction of inspiration in cinematic terms, and of those cinematic terms as a kind of conjuring to raise the dead. Mallarmé is Aubanel’s (and Elizondo’s) Faustine, or his ghostly vampire. Cinema becomes a metaphor for imagination itself

⁵⁶ Salvador Elizondo, *Camera lucida* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001), 39-40.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

– Elizondo reconfigures it as the harnessing of creative energy to produce visions. The film camera analogy, a remark that is almost tossed off, shows how much cinema could be, for Elizondo, a paradigmatic case of what inspiration looks like.

And inspiration is one of Elizondo's leading interests. His foray into film, an effort to contribute to cinema's vision-making, did not result in more cinematic adventures of his own authorship (although his works *Narda o el verano* and *El desencarnado* would be adapted in 1970 and 1978, respectively). But film coursed through many of his later literary works to face the enigma of imagination in the service of human cooperativeness (see: poetry as fuel for the world), for it is through visions that Elizondo believes one can take a fuller measure of possible human relationships. Creating visions is a process that, for him, requires the construction of new relationships of signs and sensations, which is what cinema can do with its erotic capability for montage. Throughout his years at *Nuevo Cine* and his subsequent fictions and essays, poetic writing was his choice critical approach to visionary filmmaking. That critical style relates Elizondo's criticism to Roland Barthes's poststructuralism. The title of Elizondo's book could be considered a reference to the writer who proclaimed that "[t]here are no more critics, only writers"⁶⁰ – a notion Elizondo might have endorsed. But Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is about photography, while Elizondo's is about criticism. The latter advocates for a criticism that's akin to drawing with a *camera lucida*, an apparatus in which a system of adjustable prisms projects a virtual image of an object over paper, so it becomes traceable by pen or pencil. Rather than a mechanical reproduction of reality, the *camera lucida* embodies an enhancement of the artistic hand through optics. It is therefore a fitting surrogate for Elizondo's conception of poetic investigation, for it allows the fashioning of a vision from another vision – a drawing is made

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Theory of the Text" in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, trans. Geoff Benington (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 44.

from a projection, from a ghost of reality, rather than from the real itself. The thought of criticism as applying a *camera lucida* to a text is, in essence, a device to empower the critic to follow the other writer's creative operations (understood here as bodily, sensory activities) in order to describe poetry with poetry:

The idea of using a *camera lucida* as a literary instrument is not mine or new; it subscribes *avant la lettre* to a tradition that goes back to the origins of modern languages and in which one finds only books that writers write for writers; the tradition of books that combine sensory experience, critical judgment and technique. From my own readings, the oldest book of this kind that I remember is *La Vita Nuova*. In it Dante tells us the first half of his life's path; the noteworthy facts of the experience, of the prose, present themselves in the poetry they arouse. Depending on her individual inclinations, the *sensuel moyen* reader enjoys the anecdotes, the imagery or the commentary, if not the second-hand feelings, love, beauty and intelligence she perceives in them. But seen through a *camera lucida*, the book actively reveals the movement, the poet's technical operation, through which the transmutation happens and which synthesizes the three planes of sensitivity: the real, the ideal, and the critical.⁶¹

Taking a *camera lucida* to film for critical purposes, then, would be like making cinema in writing, or tracing the flow of the film, and the sequence of actions and sensations that compose that flow, with words. So it is through a visual metaphor that Elizondo defines criticism as a poetic, creative act. That he does so in terms of vision, in writings whose ideas were first cultivated in his film criticism, place him in a line of writers who thought closely about imagination from a cinematic standpoint. The *camera lucida* as a foundational metaphor (along with the ghost) expands my sketch of the spirit of cinema for the tradition of film thought to which *Nuevo Cine* and the early film chroniclers belong. Elizondo assists on this configuration when he underscores how the dominance of photography over the *camera lucida* happened on two fronts: cultural heritage and technological influence. "It is undeniable that the development of photography, from the *camera obscura* Plato described in his cave story to its current, awe-inspiring artistic accomplishments, has contributed to relegate to oblivion, or at least grudging

⁶¹ Elizondo, *Camera lucida*, 75.

use... the instrument known from its origins in the early nineteenth century as *camera lucida* or, even these days in Spanish, *cámara clara* ['clear camera'].⁶² The triumph of *obscura* over *lucida* engenders the feeling that such dominance might have displaced a visionary and poetic relationship with the world in favor of rational mastery – an impression all the more insistent because Elizondo gently ushers Plato's cave (which, as we saw in chapter 2.0, remains a compelling shorthand for theorizing cinema) away from the spotlight. Elizondo's *camera lucida* explicitly champions film's visionary mission. If Bazin, who exhibited surrealist tendencies, once said that a cinematic image is "an hallucination that is also a fact,"⁶³ Elizondo might have disagreed, perhaps because he would have found the clarification unnecessary (he might have said that hallucinations are always facts) but, more crucially, because a hallucination can just be a hallucination, a vision just a vision, and its perplexing, enthralling power comes precisely from its imaginary existence. Greeting readers of *Nuevo Cine*'s first issue with Elizondo's eagerness to find visions would set the general feel of the journal's ecstatic writing.

Another quality of that general feel is its unabashedly European flavor. Even a cursory perusal of Elizondo's writings can spot the deep footprints of European literature and culture. His cosmopolitanism and his association with the exilic scene partially account for those inclinations. A European Western modernity has been present in this narrative since the chroniclers, who wrote while living abroad (Reyes, Guzmán, Nervo) and were often educated in the established institutions of a postcolonial country. But Bonifant's nationalism, for example, which could be reductive at times, is missing in Elizondo's work for *Nuevo Cine* despite its stated claim of rejuvenating Mexican cinema. Readers of *Nuevo Cine* often got the impression that their objective was the substitution of the national reality with an imitation of European

⁶² Ibid., 73.

⁶³ André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What is Cinema? Volume I*, 16.

artistic and philosophical values. Gambarte notes that the post-World War II atmosphere “imposed an elitist, universalist culture over nationalism” in Mexico City.⁶⁴ An unthinking Western globalism notwithstanding, a question arises about whether it is possible for a postcolonial culture like Mexico to be anything other than transnational, aware that its historical fabric is always already crossing and traversing multiple, international identities. At the same time, Elizondo’s steadfast commitment to the works he admired does not always attempt to reconcile them with local forms. He wears his late-Medieval poetry (Dante), his Baroque literary heritage (Góngora and emblems), his Symbolism (Mallarmé) and his Surrealism (Bataille and Buñuel) rather naturally, partially because he brought them to bear for his critique of his own home culture. It is telling that his assessment of Buñuel stays within the realm of the Baroque rather than the Neobaroque aesthetic that would be most readily linked to postcolonialism (in the next chapter, I will argue that José Revueltas presents a more deliberate reconfiguration of inherited literary and cinematic influences within his thinking about film). And yet, it is also undeniable that Elizondo is grappling with the question of Mexican cinema’s identity and, by association, the question of Mexican identity itself.⁶⁵ His hope to alter how films were made in Mexico, and what they were about, in the early sixties has in it the air of a negotiation between local and global strands of cinematic thought, and a desire to discover what the results of that negotiation will look like. *Nuevo Cine*’s critics did not know what their efforts would yield.

There is also an argument that for the writers of poetic investigations, cinema itself behaved as a foreign medium even in national soil. The cinephile critics, either in their wonderment at an invention that came from abroad; or their consternation at the dominance of a particular, foreign industry; or their frustration at the inaccessibility of film archives or film

⁶⁴ Gambarte, “Jomí García Ascot,” 47.

⁶⁵ Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983*, 11. Ramírez Berg argues that Buñuel’s filmmaking “redefined *Mexicanidad*.”

production equipment; or their dismay at their perception of a large artistic and ethical chasm between foreign films and the films made at home, always regarded film as something almost beyond their grasp. They thus filled their prose with imaginative leaps to reach cinema. One such leap has to do with the attendant multilingualism that often accompanies transnational texts. Toying with the phonetic integrity of a language in prose through the insertion of untranslated loan words in its stream is an important component of Mexican poetic inquiry. The feeling of remove, and the code-switching to express it (and perhaps alleviate and exacerbate it at the same time), are there in this passage of “*Moral sexual y moraleja*,” where Elizondo speaks wistfully about *La mancha de sangre* (*The Blood Stain*, 1937), a film whose scenes set at a brothel incited its banning, re-editing for release, and disappearance until its restoration in 1997. It was precisely the kind of erotic cinema Elizondo wanted to see, and given its forbidden, scandalous history, it seduced Elizondo more for its myth than its reality. He could not have seen it in his youth, so mentioning it was like speaking about an unknown other world (for the purposes of highlighting the loan words, I will reproduce the passage in its original Spanish first, with the English translation below):

Este film [La mancha de sangre], ahora casi olvidado, se convirtió a lo largo de los años en una leyenda, una leyenda secreta que los escolapios del Colegio de México evocábamos con terror fascinante. ¡La mancha de sangre!, la mera enunciación de este título evocaba en nuestras mentes, todavía adormiladas por la “houkah” de la primera comunión, imágenes de cabaret donde hombres y mujeres bailaban desnudos “cheek to cheek,” donde hombres con mujeres esbozaban en la penumbra, sobre bruñidas camas de latón, tenaces y provocativas calistenias.

[This film (*La mancha de sangre*), now almost forgotten, became a legend through the years, a secret legend that us schoolboys from *Colegio de México* evoked with fascinating terror. *La mancha de sangre!* The sole utterance of the title evoked in our minds – still-sleepy thanks to the “houkah” of the first communion – images of night clubs where men and women danced cheek to cheek naked, where men rehearsed tenacious and provocative calisthenics in the dark, over polished brass beds, with women.]⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Elizondo, “Moral sexual,” 6.

The English “cheek to cheek” tags unseen, imaginary scenes as desirable, unattainable, and alien. Elizondo was not an exile like most of his *Nuevo Cine* cohorts, but his writing was a snug fit among his colleagues’ pieces. Like the latter, his criticism and filmmaking have a certain accent, in the sense Hamid Naficy developed the term for exilic and diasporic filmmaking. Reading his characterization of an accented cinematic style, it strikes me that many of its features correspond to those of Mexican poetic investigation, particularly

open-form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual... self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure... subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synesthetic, liminal and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of... biographical, social and cinematic (dis)location...⁶⁷

And that is certainly the case with Elizondo’s structurally complex, independently produced, politically minded and highly personal works in criticism and film (*Apocalypse 1900*, for starters, is completely in French). Naficy speaks of filmmakers, but these aspects of accented cinema happen in Elizondo’s poetic investigations as well and, in accordance with the foregoing, poetic investigation and cinema are two manifestations of the same creative drive. In addition to his multilingualism, Elizondo’s articles for *Nuevo Cine* are deeply subjective, friendly to subversive relationships and desires, emphatic of sensory experience, and certainly contending with conflicting identities.

But the impact of the exilic condition would be even more visible in some of his colleagues, including the one who became the editor-in-chief and leader of the *Nuevo Cine* journal: Jomí García Ascot.

⁶⁷ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

3.2 THE INSPIRATION OF DISPLACEMENT AND NOSTALGIA:

JOMÍ GARCÍA ASCOT

3.2.1 A Grounding Presence

If Elizondo went farther than any of his colleagues in the literary aspirations of his criticism, José Miguel “Jomí” García Ascot might be said to have been the critic who gave *Nuevo Cine* a semblance of theoretical consistency. That’s not to say poetry didn’t populate his writings. Of all the core members of *Nuevo Cine*, García Ascot is the one with the most extensive poet’s résumé. That also made him representative of an atmosphere where poetic inquiry could thrive. For Gambarte, “poetry dominated the Mexican cultural scene in the fifties,” with names like Castellanos, Tomás Segovia, Eduardo Lizalde and Jaime Sabines leading a literary ecology that was simultaneously “rigorously learned, universalist, subjective and critical” and “anti-intellectualist, populist and colloquial.”⁶⁸ García Ascot’s own work entered publication after the advent of the poetry boom, yet his six volumes of poems, while accessible, did not forgo more literate allusions (primarily to Generation of ‘98’s Antonio Machado, who balanced romanticism and modernism in his poetry), feeding off both of the previous decade’s tendencies. An avid critic of painting and music, he was already an experienced documentarian in both Mexico – where he worked on television – and Cuba – where he also served as an advisor at the prestigious ICAIC, the Cuban Institute of Film Art and Industry, and made the shorts “*Un día de trabajo*” and “*Los novios*” for the Revolution-themed omnibus film *Cuba ’58* (1961) – before contributing to *Nuevo Cine* and co-writing and directing the group’s most notable addition to Mexican cinema: *En el balcón vacío* (1962), which received the Critics’ Prize at the Locarno Film Festival

⁶⁸ Eduardo Mateo Gambarte, *Exilio, infancia perdida, identidad e imposibilidad de retorno: En el balcón vacío de Jomí García Ascot y María Luis Elío* (Leer-e: Pamplona, Spain, 2015), eBook.

of 1962. At fifty-two minutes in length, the film did not receive a commercial release, but it found more viewers than *Apocalypse 1900* would years later. Also, more than Elizondo's film, García Ascot wanted to tie his film to the journal, not only because other members worked on this pioneering independent film (Emilio García Riera adapted, with García Ascot, María Luisa Elío's original screenplay), but because *Nuevo Cine* had to affirm its presence in the Mexican film panorama to see its critical/educational/artistic project crystallize. This section investigates how his criticism, poetry and filmmaking incorporate into the tradition of producing knowledge about film from its faculties to stimulate the imagination, and how in this case, the stimulation stems strongly from the interaction between film and the author's displacement – the latter another defining trait of *Nuevo Cine* as a whole.

The child of a Spanish diplomat, Jomí García Ascot was born in Tunisia and traveled throughout his life. He was twelve years old when his family reached Mexico in 1939, and studied philosophy at the National University (where he wrote his thesis on Baudelaire's poetry). Co-founder of film clubs at UNAM and the French Institute of Latin America, he wrote for many publications before, during and after his tenure at *Nuevo Cine*, like *México en la cultura* and *Presencia*, the first professional magazine he originated. Writing was his home, and while he would participate in a few more documentaries, he did not become a full-time filmmaker, returning, in a pattern familiar to other figures in these pages, to literature and criticism. The documentary work, a relatively more viable way into production than fiction film, might have also been the result of the generously pedagogical impulse of a serial film club organizer. If Elizondo's journal pieces were aggressively cultured, etching allusions and images into his texts like filigree, García Ascot very openly attempted for the reader to keep up with him. The comprehensibility and classicism of his major, most quoted articles for *Nuevo Cine* is a good

entryway for his cinematic thinking, as it seems to stand at the end of the spectrum of aesthetic effect opposite Elizondo. Yet many of the same ideas about cinema introducing the viewer to an enigmatic dimension appealing to the viewers' visionary acumen are apparent in his theoretical essays, and they also pollinate his literary writings of part-cinematic descent.

3.2.2 Nostalgia for Influence: García Ascot's Cinematic and Literary Ties

The pedagogy animating Gambarte's claim that García Ascot's "greatest influence was... in the introduction of the new sensibilities of European and American cinema"⁶⁹ to Mexico is on full display in a piece that recognizes, explains, and exults in the innovations of André Bazin. Published, like "*Moral sexual y moraleja*," in the first issue of *Nuevo Cine*, "*André Bazin y el nuevo cine*" ("André Bazin and the New Cinema") is coherent with *Nuevo Cine*'s didactic objectives, as it immediately seeks to establish a theoretical program. The article begins calling out the problem of a disconnect between film theory and film praxis, in a reductive, but provocative, account of writings about film ontology:

For a few long years – more or less from the decade between 1930 and 1940 – a growing gulf between the theory and practice of film has been open. Until then, a kind of "Old Testament" covered almost entirely any attempt at analysis and it succeeded, to a larger or lesser extent, to comment on the images studios produced all around the world. This "Old Testament" revolved primarily around Eisenstein's masterful studies of *Film Form* and *Film Sense*, as well as Pudovkin's analyses of the film image and its continuity. Next to these foundational texts, a handful of essays and books by Kulechov [*sic*], Béla Balász, Grierson, Spottiswoode, Epstein, etc., added a cluster of perspectives and layers, but without altering the conceptual principles of the established aesthetic.⁷⁰

The principal obstacle to the fruitful union of theory and filmmaking in that period, García Ascot believed, was the "trauma of the coming of sound," a moment of crisis that drew attention to the wrong questions. Theorists struggled to bring the problem of sound into their debates, in a

⁶⁹ Gambarte, "Jomí García Ascot," 47.

⁷⁰ Jomí García Ascot, "André Bazin and the New Cinema" in *Nuevo Cine* 1, (April 1961): 12.

quarrel that García Ascot calls, in self-consciously literary terms, a “Parmenideo-Heraclitan dispute.”⁷¹ In that push-pull between immovability and change, García Ascot says, critics either ignored the problem of sound entirely, or concentrated on thematic, narrative, psychological or sociological points without a “confrontation... between an aesthetic system and a praxis that appeared ever more contradictory.”⁷² Bazin would demonstrate, however, that it was not sound that truly represented a rupture in film history, but an attitude toward cinema that split filmmakers into Bazin’s two familiar categories: believers in the image (who add to the things represented an allusive value through traditional montage) and believers in reality (who “allow the filmed matter plural or ambiguous meaning,” and for whom montage is a “habitat for the action and not the action itself”).⁷³ Bazin’s insights are more persuasive, for García Ascot, because of how they “reveal the close interdependence between cinema’s expressive means, its language, and the ontology of the entities it represents,”⁷⁴ an articulation that previous theories had not been able to unwrap. He finishes, as he must, pointing out that Bazin is not just the new cinema’s most important theorist – the author of a “New Testament” in film theory – but is also greatly responsible for that new cinema’s very birth: a not-so-veiled indication that critics, perhaps even *Nuevo Cine*’s, can indeed invent the future of the art form.

A quick summary of Bazin’s work (more specifically “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema”) and a partial celebration of the then recent release of the collection *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* and the life of its author, who had died three years before, García Ascot’s inaugural *Nuevo Cine* article leaves on a note of anticipation for further discoveries. Like De la Colina in his review of *Breathless*, García Ascot looks forward to the invention of a novel language to

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

name novel cinemas, or the emergence of novel cinemas from novel theories. The last note of belief in how critical writing can precede, and engineer, cinema's evolutions, goes hand-in-hand with the feeling that García Ascot does not understand Bazin for a commitment to realism (that term appears not once in the article), but instead for his rearrangement of cinematic thought around aesthetics. García Ascot does not think of cinema for how it can record or document, but how it extrudes poetic emissions. Filmmakers who believe in reality give the entities in their film "plural or ambiguous meaning" – which is different than claiming there is a certain faithfulness in their reproduction – and they do so for expressive purposes. It's the emphasis on the construction of ambiguity rather than certainty (of hallucinations rather than facts) that keeps García Ascot's own notion of cinema consistent with the visionary conjuring of an enigmatic outside, and of film as a sphere that comes to the spectator, rather than one that the spectator can occupy.

The essay "*Actuación y ambigüedad*" ("Acting and Ambiguity") contains one of his passionate defenses of productive uncertainty, and one that taps into feelings associated with exile and foreignness. It is also a good companion piece to the Bazin essay, for it keeps the considerations of changes in film grammar and attitudes toward it front and center. In a highly accessible, italics-filled (for emphasis) prose that proceeds elegantly and schematically, García Ascot highlights the *agon* of tackling film acting in criticism:

One of the most difficult aspects of film evaluation is performance. Within the evolution of film language – which is rarely properly appreciated – there is a consequent evolution of the physical and verbal representation of actors. And sometimes the latter is the most obvious of all the new expressive forms, becoming evidence of the more general and larger problems of those forms. Therefore, understanding the aspects of performance constitutes a very important step toward the assimilation of the other problems of each new stage of film language.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Jomí García Ascot. "Actuación y ambigüedad" in *Nuevo Cine 2* (June 1961): 13.

The two aspects of performance to which he limits his analysis are “*tone and rhythm*,”⁷⁶ and only in the cases of what he terms “dramatic” performances – that is, not the “theatrical” performances of silent cinema for their “unnecessary” overcompensation for a lack of sound; or the performance in the films of, for instance, Griffith and Eisenstein, where actors are turned into “objects;” or physically comedic performances in which there is an intended correspondence between the internal conflict of characters and how they exteriorize them. He will also not worry about the technical process of actors and directors, but will instead think of a performance as “a given whole” for the spectator, the end result of the actor’s work that ends up on the screen.⁷⁷

The principal, if not the only, assumption in García Ascot’s theory of film acting is that rhythm and tone make intelligible a character’s “inner state,” and since the details of a film’s dialogue, narrative and design will give clues as to what those inner states are, tone and rhythm must stand “in *confrontation*” to those details. The first impulse is to see and assess these elements not in confrontation, but in concordance. When the tone and rhythm of the performance match the film, the performances fit and immerse the viewer in the story. They enact what seems logical and natural to the setting, the environment, and the situation. The immersion, through an actor’s subordination to fitting into the pace and atmosphere of the film, has a fatal shortcoming:

Now, this framework has offered, and continues to offer, an increasingly grave danger. Since it is easier (not just for the actor, but also for the viewer) to think “downwards” about what is adequate (toward a neutral state) than to think “upwards,” acting and its appreciation have quickly reached the school of “sobriety” that has lorded the screens for years. Ever more “sober” actors, ever more falsely “natural,” have impoverished film to unexpected limits. And, on top of that, they have done so with no lessening of their prestige, since the spectator’s natural tendency to project her emotions onto the screen has involuntarily enriched the emptiest of performances. Sobriety and naturalism do not contradict the spectator, and she comes to believe the performance has been a model of adequacy. Besides, in this system, the *individual, personal* story that generates the deepest interest in a film disappears. The representation becomes the presentation of a hollow being that each viewer can fill. The character does not *oppose*, and therefore does

⁷⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁷ Jomí García Ascot, “Actuación y ambigüedad,” 13.

not *impose* itself over its viewers. Empty, it surrenders to them, willing to please their complacency. The operation suppresses the fundamental problem of vital communication, and hence of artistic communication: the perception of the *other*, of what is *other*, the very existence of that “otherness” about which Machado speaks and which finds an echo in each and every major philosophical current of our time.⁷⁸

The more productive objective is the imposition of a characters’ own presence in the film’s flow. According to García Ascot, through switching and manipulating the tone and rhythm of their performances, the actors can create dissonances with and resistances to the film itself. The unexpected variations and clashes add what García Ascot valued in the Bazinian belief in reality: ambiguity, which makes the performance, and the film itself, “unique...irreducible... [and] more human.”⁷⁹ This is not ambiguity for the sake of confusion or equivocation, but one that bears witness to a constitutive uncertainty in life. He reminds the reader that “ambiguity is not deviation, but *variation* and *amplification*,” and that it “simultaneously hits and misses the bullseye.”⁸⁰ A performance, or more precisely, the way an actor reacts to the circumstances, must fit and yet look out of place, always slightly off. García Ascot operates under the conviction that “only the other can enrich us. Even in a process of ‘projection-identification, it is that which is extra, which bounces back at us, that can expand our mental and emotional interiority.”⁸¹ Some actors who were able to propel their performances from the screen onto the viewer (like Quiroga’s unfastening ghosts) and in turn prevent their colonization – and thus the unlearning – by the viewer, are names like Cary Grant (“a master of polyrhythmia”) Julie Harris and Montgomery Clift (“dissonant performers”), Anthony Perkins, Jeanne Moreau and Sidney Poitier (“figures... of polytonality”) and Brando, Dean and Belmondo (“figures... of atonality”).⁸² In many of them, the tendencies overlap. All are exemplary of a modulation and

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁹ Jomí García Ascot, “Actuación y ambigüedad,” 14.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁸¹ Ibid, 14.

⁸² Ibid, 15.

control of tone and rhythm that is successfully at odds with that of the films in which they appear.

Tone and rhythm variations introduce otherness, and García Ascot argues that compelling dramatic acting is expressing otherness as defined by Spanish writer and exile Antonio Machado (1875-1939). The latter deserves a detour, for he is yet another figure who, like Mallarmé, embodies poetic investigation for the *Nuevo Cine* writers. In Machado's work, otherness, the openness of the body to time, eroticism and imagination all converge. In fact, he quite literally projected to become poetry in action. For Max Aub, Machado represents "a way of being," in that, for him, poetry is life – one that must be lived with "a romantic lineage, simple kindness, intellectual vigor and sincere melancholy."⁸³ Every activity, in Machado's eyes, had to follow poetic inspiration. He created his apocryphal "*heterónimos*" (his complementary others, as opposed to "doubles"), Abel Martín and Juan de Mairena, fictional writers and "poet-philosophers" under whose names he expressed his investigations in lyrical language. And Machado also passed on to *Nuevo Cine* a hope to overcome the discontinuous self through what he called *cordialidad*, which means both friendliness and sincerity – echoes of which are also present in Elizondo's solidarity. Juan Malpartida explains Machado's thoughts on what, for García Ascot's theory of acting, is the need to avoid the sameness that results from encouraging identifications rather than otherness. For Malpartida, "Machado observes the universalizing impetus: what happens in me happens in everyone, but despite that, what such poetic world expresses... is the 'intimacy of the individual subject' and contempt for or ignorance of reason and feeling (which he will more accurately call *cordialidad*), both of which are forms that

⁸³ Max Aub, *Manual de historia de la literatura española* (Madrid: Akal, 1966), 474.

transcend the individual.”⁸⁴ If that were not enough, universalizing tendencies (in writing and otherwise), which for him appeared in movements like Symbolism, fuel “a diminishing of *cordialidad* and a total eclipse of ideas.”⁸⁵ García Ascot, too, is not just looking after solidarity, but after the possibilities for creative thinking.

But Machado was also critical of “subjective solipsism,” which he also feared lurked in Surrealism’s “descent.... into the very hell of the subconscious.” Malpartida points out that Machado argued Surrealism was “an exaltation of a subjectivity completely dissociated from reason” and “an imaginative depletion.”⁸⁶ And here there appears to be a rift in the philosophies running through *Nuevo Cine*, with García Ascot espousing Machado’s romantic modernism and Elizondo adopting a dogged Surrealism. The variety is, of course, not unwelcome, unusual or unproductive in a publication that professed to invite new voices to the conversation on cinema. It is also not a complete disagreement. In part, Machado is reacting to certain branches of Surrealism, an avant-garde movement that would prove as internally diverse as it did lasting. Bataille eroticism and Elizondo’s take on it would sit rather comfortably with Machado’s own meditations on love and desire to be other and for an other: “that appetite,” Malpartida continues, “is erotic, a passionate affirmation of another being that reveals itself to [someone] every time she feels herself as an absence.”⁸⁷ Finding oneself to be an absence is a process analogous to Peretz formulation that the body has an immanent outside, a trace of an enigmatic dimension that refuses the body to close in on itself, and to Elizondo’s handling of surgery and mutilation. Machado’s chase for a poetic life exploded in his own fragmentation of himself – into Mairena, Martín and even in a double for his regular poetic practice. See how in one of his most celebrated

⁸⁴ Juan Malpartida. “Antonio Machado” in *Letras Libres*, December 2008, <http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/entrevista/antonio-machado?page=full>

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Malpartida, “Antonio Machado.”

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

passages, Machado invents a Sartrean non-identical self through a kind of splitting process, all as a means to write poetry:

Mairena used to say to his students: Before writing a poem one must imagine a poet capable of writing it. The poem once written, we can preserve both the poet and his poem; or disengage the poet and publish his poem, which is standard procedure; or toss the poem in the wastebasket and stay with the poet; or, finally, rid ourselves of both and preserve only the imagining man, keyed for new poetic experience.⁸⁸

Machado's doubling is also a reminder that the specters and the imaginary of which I speak in reference to these works are not a kind of reflective imagination, but a genuine vision of what is other. The poet Machado – through Mairena – can end up with is not the same as himself, and even if, in the end, the “imaginative man” could be said to be the original poet, the process has led to his temporary transformation. What Elizondo and García Ascot are after is not repetition or mere variation, but unknown, unforeseeable, collaborative futures (for Mexican cinema and within cinema) – that is, legitimate and solidary otherness. Malpartida compares Machado's other selves with Borges's self, which Malpartida found to be a cluster of “mirages and specters:” “Borges conceptualized the self on one extreme as illusory, or as a perpetual possibility, thanks to the imagination, of being other. A man is all men, and only ideas and metaphors are, in a sense, real. In either case, in Borges, self-perception is not a source of cordial, affirmative alterity, but a profusion of mirrors and reflections.”⁸⁹ It's curious that Malpartida would refer to Borges on this matter. Machado does not speak of Borges's work directly nor is he likely to have read his most famous works, but Borges's story “The Immortal” stands as a refutation of, or at least as an argument against, eternal reflection and timelessness. Borges's tale comes to a realization of the hunger for the unrepeatable that mortality engenders:

⁸⁸ Antonio Machado, *Juan de Mairena: Epigrams, Maxims, Memoranda, and Memoirs of an Apocryphal Professor*, trans. Ben Belitt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 47.

⁸⁹ Malpartida, “Antonio Machado.”

Death (or reference to death) makes men precious and pathetic; their ghostliness is touching; any act they perform may be their last; there is no face that is not on the verge of blurring and fading away like the faces in a dream. Everything in the world of mortals has the value of the irrecoverable and contingent. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *advertiginem*. There is nothing that is not as though lost between indefatigable mirrors. Nothing can occur but once, nothing is precious in peril of being lost.⁹⁰

For Borges, even learning is at stake when he quotes, as an epigraph to “The Immortal,” Francis Bacon’s proposition that “as Plato had an imagination, that all knowledge was but remembrance; so Solomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion.”⁹¹ “The Immortal,” for one, shows Borges on the side of an imaginative practice that goes beyond recollection and forgetfulness and into invention, just like Machado (and García Ascot and Elizondo).

However, I do agree with Malpartida’s description of Machado’s self, which “is plural, cannot be identical to itself because in finding itself, it discovers its alterity.”⁹² Such discovery is also, for Machado, a return to the world, for it points the self to that which is outside itself and makes it heterogeneous rather than unitary – again, a way of transcending the self to be cordial and solidary toward the other entities in it. Imagination entails finding out that our bodies and what emanates from them (like thoughts) are both ours and not ours, and that they must acknowledge, like Borges’s mortals, the passage of time. Creativity becomes, in that light, the construction of methods to assimilate and practice that incompleteness shared between the world and ourselves. For Machado’s poetry, this means avoiding a fall into complete abstraction or excessive imagery, and interlacing the self, through words, with real objects and places. The seventh stanza from “*De mi cartera*” (“From My Wallet”) wrestles words from sole human possession and ends sharing their possession with the world, in this case, with water:

⁹⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 15.

⁹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 3. Once again, a Platonic conception appears only to be countered.

⁹² Malpartida, “Antonio Machado.”

The adjective and the noun,
havens for clear water,
are accidents of the verb
in the lyrical grammar
of a Today that will be Tomorrow,
of a Yesterday that remains Still.⁹³

Or see how he does the opposite in *Fields of Castile*, where feelings are taken from nature and taken metaphorically into the body:

These riverside black-poplars, which accompany
with the rustling of their dry leaves
the sound of the water, when the wind blows,
bear, carved in their bark,
initials standing for names
of lovers, numbers standing for dates.
Poplars of love, which yesterday had
your boughs full of nightingales;
poplars which tomorrow will be lyres
of the fragrant springtime wind;
poplars of love near the waters
the flow and pass by and dream [...]
you are with me, my heart carries you along!⁹⁴

The passages speak of the experience of the discovery of otherness, of being an other that only partially belongs to us, after a contact with the entities in the world. Poetic inspiration is both a solution to and a result of a “nostalgia for the constitutive other,”⁹⁵ of a longing for that other that is part of us and yet we cannot possess or master. Here, our detour into Machado’s work ends, for it is that combination of nostalgia and otherness where the muses of García Ascot’s literary and cinematic thought live. Ambiguity in performance produces behavior that makes a character with which the viewer must engage in this creative, visionary level.

It would be easy to read García Ascot’s exilic life in his concern with otherness and nostalgia. That is certainly how critics have read his poetry and *En el balcón vacío*. Nostalgia

⁹³ Antonio Machado, “De mi cartera” in *Antonio Machado: Poesía y Prosa* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1991), 101.

⁹⁴ Antonio Machado, *Fields of Castile/Campos de Castilla*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 47.

⁹⁵ Malpartida, “Antonio Machado.”

unifies García Ascot's work, and a drive to turn absence into presence. "[N]ostalgia that remains nostalgia can only be an autobiographical form. The nostalgic subject is one who has lost hope in the present and isolates herself in a dreamed past. In García Ascot's poetry, nostalgia – for people, for paradise, for essence – knows how to become presence and so a road for hope."⁹⁶ Like Machado's, García Ascot's poetry is filled with the appreciation of tactile instants and how they expose us to time and change. Often, those instants come within reflections on writing itself, underscoring the preeminence of creative activity. The echoes between the poets should be quickly apparent in this excerpt from García Ascot's "*Un poema*" ("A Poem"):

A poem is touching with one's throat
The weight of things, their word,
To utter their shadow
A park-like silence on the water
A rush of sails through the soul

A poem is being
Being again
At that brief instant
When time would last
And we didn't know it.⁹⁷

The evocative image of touching the weight of things with one's throat links the symbolic and the material, a nostalgic conflation of the real feel of things and their meaning for memory. One might wonder if the stress on nostalgia in fact contradicts the idea of visionary thought, and returns to the Platonic idea that "all knowledge is but remembrance." For that, look at the final stanza, which takes care not to make of memory a matter of remembering something that was or that still is, but something unexpected and strange – an instant we lived, but did not know. The

⁹⁶ "Jomí García Ascot: *Un otoño en el aire*" in *Poesía Mexicana del Siglo XX*, <http://poesiamexicanasxx.tumblr.com/jomigarciaascot> (accessed on December 8th, 2014).

⁹⁷ Jomí García Ascot, "*Un poema*" in *Revista Diálogos: antología*, ed. José María Espinasa (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 2008), 14.

paradox of being again in a new place makes García Ascot's poem a reworking of an aphoristic musing on poetry that Machado credited to his fictional alter ego Juan de Mairena:

Poetry, Mairena maintained, is the dialogue... of man with his own time. The poet would eternize it if he could, disengaging it wholly from time – a difficult and time-consuming labor requiring almost all the time given a poet to accomplish. The poet is a fisher in time: not of fish in the sea, but the whole living catch; let us be clear about that: of the fish who go on living in the aftermath of the catch.⁹⁸

Some of cinema's allure, for García Ascot (and Elizondo) rests on that same paradox: the preservation of expired moments that remain alive. Actors can make this happen, García Ascot suggests, if they refuse to fade into a film and, instead, perpetually contest and oppose it with variations of tone and rhythm.

En el balcón vacío, the story of Gabriela, a Mexico City-dwelling woman (played by Nuri Pereña as a child, and María Luisa Elío as an adult) who remembers one traumatic episode from her childhood during the Spanish Civil War when she saw, from her family's balcony, a Republican insurgent being arrested in mid-flight, would become García Ascot's most ambitious film about nostalgic visions of otherness. Shot in 16mm film over a period of two years' worth of weekends, with the voluntary participation of friends and colleagues, the film is *Nuevo Cine's* true legacy on film. Like *Apocalypse 1900*, it has clearly absorbed its author's literary and cinematic concepts while twisting them enough for something different to emerge. There are scenes constructed with the techniques most associated with Bazin: long takes and shots with great depth of field. He directs most of his actors, particularly Pereña, to an intriguing blankness (an "atonality" to use his word) punctuated by detectable incongruous expressions. There is something of Bresson to García Ascot's approach to performance: a scene where young Gabriela sees a group of school children throwing rocks at a man that's standing by a barred window, yelling "¡rojo!" ("red!"), climaxes when Gabriela and the man exchange a long, silent look after

⁹⁸ Machado, *Juan de Mairena*, 21.

the children leave. The man, despite the attack, looks at the girl with a rather savage, wide-eyed smile that, very slowly, becomes contagious, as she smiles – more discreetly – back. García Ascot appears more interested in his actors' physiognomy than their ability to convincingly emote. But next to his faith in reality in such moments, there is faith in the image as well, since three montages create a symmetrical punctuation to the short, and convey the conflict between remembered life and current life: an early montage acclimates the viewer to the protagonist's childhood apartment, a place that appears first empty, but then is filled with the members of the family engaged in their personal activities in different rooms – a moment in shared life where everyone takes time for themselves simultaneously, so they are both together and alone. The second montage shows the surroundings of Gabriela's adulthood in exile in Mexico City, a boisterous metropolis, intercut with quiet corners of her apartment and building – a reminder of the silent spaces that, even within the noise of an active city, allow the mind to wander in painful directions. The final montage returns to the first apartment, which is now truly vacant, decades after the original incident. Uninhabited and unfurnished, its emptiness is the cumulative effect of successive shots of its cavernous spaces.

While there is enough evidence to argue García Ascot makes gestures toward the film grammar and style of both “Old” and “New Testament” cinemas as he defined them, three qualities of the film combine to suggest that “nostalgia” means finding one's otherness. The first is García Ascot's adoption of his readings of Bazin. The film lingers on the objects that spark the girl's curiosity – the rustling of the paper wrapping a package as it is peeled off, the petals of flowers Gabriela the child keeps pressed between the pages of a heavy book, her fascination with a jeweled drawer pull – all shot in lengthy, uninflected takes. Texture drives the opening credit sequence, where the titles appear on the smoother side of what seems to be a wall with flaking

paint or crumbling plaster, all pictures of decay and time passing, but also of a concern with touch. The early images, which a voice-over narration suggests are memories, are treated with immediacy and given presence. Indeed, it is difficult to call it a flashback, since no cinematic present has been visually established in the film. It begins with the fleeing Republican's arrest and continues through the days preceding the girl's departure, then cutting to her Mexican life, years later. The temporal arrangement of the events markedly avoids visual analepsis, maintaining the linearity of time. Young Gabriela's scenes are not made to look like the past. Only through their vividness, amplified by their presentness, can the objects become items of nostalgia. Their residual presence is inexplicably insistent – they might have individual meaning, but for the protagonist, they are inseparable from the moment in which they appear.

Second is the filmmaker's decision of exploring the exile's nostalgia through the perspectives of childhood and femaleness. The film's other lead actress, María Luisa Elío, was also the author of the film's original scenario and dialogue (Emilio García Riera and García Ascot collaborated with Elío in the final screenplay). She was also García Ascot's wife⁹⁹ and a fellow exile. The film is nakedly autobiographical, where Elío laments the loss of her home, and anxiously realizes the memories of that home are rapidly fading. Elío started the screenplay while in Havana, while accompanying García Ascot for the shooting of his segments of *Cuba '58* – that is, she wrote it possibly channeling feelings of second-degree homesickness, this time having left Mexico, her adopted home, for Cuba. It is largely a film about what, to the film's audiences, would appear to be a conventional girlhood: a double of Elío herself, the protagonist performs scenes where, for instance, she plays with dolls she tucks into bed as if they were her children; the film further frames her in the domestic space, almost always surrounded by women

⁹⁹ The couple were friends with Gabriel García Márquez, to the extent that the Colombian Nobel Laureate dedicated his most famous work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to Elío and García Ascot.

who cook and sew. The male figures throughout act distant or threatening – the girl speaks freely and comfortably only with women, and her voice-over calls desperately for her mother, whose grave she visits in the film’s final act. One could speculate about the reasons for exploring the affective landscape of exile through a woman’s eyes. Perhaps it was too painful, for García Ascot, to make a film directly about himself, and needed a very distinct avatar to confront that pain. Also, García Ascot might have followed Machado again, for whom, according to Malpartida, “woman is the most intense access to otherness.”¹⁰⁰ The misogyny of that statement does not eliminate the sense that, for Machado (and García Ascot), other beings are always others, whether they exist within or without gender divides. Another, non-exclusive possibility is that García Ascot was attracted to cinema for its almost inescapable tendency toward collaboration and, thus, for how it enabled him to get in touch with otherness – any otherness – through the translations of creative visions between filmmakers who bring their different, complementary crafts to a project. Whatever the case, the film is arguably as personal for García Ascot as it is for Elío, but the director’s remove from the material could have been another strategy for seeing a certain alienating disconnect in the final film, one that would productively enhance the exilic experience for the film’s viewers.

Third, and most striking, is the use of voice-over. Her staccato bursts of yearning and doubt have the air of an oral improvisation (she took part in the Mexican theatre troupe *Poesía en voz alta*¹⁰¹ [Poetry Out Loud] in the 1950s). Elío’s voice sets up the start of the story and explains the thoughts running through Gabriela’s head, but we never see its source until the final act, when our protagonist, now grown up, walks aimlessly through the streets of Mexico City. An overwhelming panic at the disappearance of her past has sent her wandering, and as her

¹⁰⁰ Malpartida, “Antonio Machado.”

¹⁰¹ *Poesía en Voz Alta*, founded in 1956 by writer Juan José Arreola, is now a poetry festival held annually at *Casa del Lago* a UNAM-run cultural center.

walking becomes more erratic, her voice grows more and more urgent and disturbed, culminating on a visit to her old apartment that's become even more desolate. Elío's performance in this section allows us to connect the voice-over to the woman on the screen, but it is only until the very last shot that her voice and her mouth move in unison. The film denies the viewer suture until the very end, when the source of the voice appears in the frame – it is as if her thoughts, which have been rattling throughout the film as spoken words, have been there from the beginning, and just in the end does she manage to catch up with them. Yet despite the accomplishment of synchronized sound and the comforting feeling that a ghost has been put back in its rightful body – the moment when voice and body seemingly become one sound-image – the encounter is unsuccessful: rather than becoming whole, she realizes her incompleteness. She leans against the wall, defeated by the impossibility of returning to the past. Her voice and her body finally match, but the world and her visions of it do not.

Asynchronous sound, female/male differences, scenes with a heavy haptic charge... these are only a few approaches *En el balcón vacío* takes into the problem of nostalgia. And while there are several perplexities around the concept – like coping with it, sharing it, and expressing it – the one that interests me here is how nostalgia's reliance on an empirical and historical past can be coeval to the visionary futurity at the heart of poetic inquiry. That question hovers over *Nuevo Cine*'s own attempts to obliterate, in commentary, the film's connection to the Civil War and the Spanish diaspora. Both Elizondo and de la Colina (who collaborated on the film and appeared in it in small roles) campaigned to usher viewers into a particular reading of the film.

Here's Elizondo:

The film is not about the Civil War in Spain; nor is it about, to my mind, Migration either; it's not about contemporary history, or the struggle, or society; it is, like Proust's work, about memory, but a memory devoid of the references that provoke recollections...

It is therefore about nostalgia, the feeling produced by the definitive, insurmountable rupture between the past and the present.¹⁰²

De la Colina furthers that impression: “We viewers of *En el balcón vacío* agree that this is not a film about the Spanish Civil War or the subsequent migration. The matter of the film, the fabric of its images, is nostalgia. I mean this is the film’s content, its context...”¹⁰³ *Nuevo Cine*’s critics seem to be guarding the film’s longevity in a misguided notion that, if read as a product of its time, the film will never be appreciated once that time passes. For Elizondo, art cannot be judged by its “context” because the context of all works of art “is The Context, that is, the human.”¹⁰⁴ Cecilia Enjuto Rangel is rightly skeptical of this rhetoric, which she sees as unnecessary, since

representing the past nostalgically does not involve emptying it of its particular context, or depoliticizing it, or monumentalizing it. I think the vision of historical memory in *En el balcón vacío* as memory distorted by time and distance reveals another way of establishing its ethical and political critique of the fascists’ war, without necessarily turning into a Republican pamphlet. The film’s dedication to “the Spaniards who died in exile” is without a doubt taking a political stance.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, the film does not label its period or setting with extra-diegetic titles or in the voice-over, but the Civil War ties are unequivocal. The addition of stock footage of people wandering through rubble and hopping onto buses with their possessions bear witness to destruction and displacement that really did take place. Yet the accent is not on the painful inaccessibility of the past. The quality of the loss is both a direct result of the war-driven exile – unintended, violent, unjust and preventable had the violence been rejected and averted – and of inevitable temporal change. The protagonist is clearly going through a process of remembrance, but the film makes a

¹⁰² Quoted in Emilio García Riera, *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano. Vol. VIII* (Mexico City: Era, 1969), 122.

¹⁰³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

¹⁰⁵ Cecilia Enjuto Rangel, “La mirada nostálgica del exilio en *En el balcón vacío* (1962)” in *Exilio y cosmopolitismo en el arte y la literatura hispánica*, ed. Araceli Tinajero (Madrid: Verbum, 2013), 159-160.

point of not framing the early sections between moments that incite the memories. Consequently, that first section, seemingly set in Spain in the 1930s, does not appear to be made out of just Elío's recollections, but out of the filmmakers' inventions of that past in Mexico City. In the order of their conception and realization, not their placement in the film, childhood *follows* adulthood, not the other way around – that imaginary childhood is the creative act that makes the past available, but constructs a potential future in the form of a more experimental Mexican cinema and a hopeful implementation of new cinematic languages. It is telling that the film represented Mexico, not Spain, in its festival run.

But I must clarify that futurity, when it comes to the work of *Nuevo Cine*'s writers, is not a matter of looking forward instead of backwards, but of creating from and around history's openness, and imaginatively embracing a certain mutuality with it – the human and history constantly shape one another. The film contains hints that it is through play, through poetic activity, that we can both affect time and be open to how it affects us. The scene with the man at the window, whom the children pelt with stones while accusing him of communist allegiances, is instructive: in that moment, Gabriela, through a spontaneous smile, shares a peaceful, solidary silence with the man – someone whom she does not know. That he is coded as a Republican does not mean he is in fact one, and the film does not confirm it. So the question is if Gabriela herself, younger than the kids who attacked the man, is really aware of that man's politics, and if that matters for the instant they exchange a look. There are clues to the answer throughout the film. In the first scene, watching the chase of the running man, she quickly realizes he is hiding, and wordlessly resolves not to give him away to his pursuers. The girl observes while the voice-over intones words of comfort and assistance to that man, as if Gabriela wished the man could read her thoughts and find a sympathetic spirit. ("Stay still. Don't let them see you. I won't say

anything. Don't be afraid"). He does not see her (no contact occurs), and he is taken. Later, the film lets an atmosphere of paranoia, surveillance and mistrust set in a scene where a stranger interrogates Gabriela about her father's whereabouts with sinister, pretend friendliness. Again, she won't talk. So there are, at that juncture, three scenes where the girl refuses to assist oppressive forces. The first scene plays, in part, like a game of hide-and-seek that ends with the fugitive's capture. It is also a kind of trial run for the smile scene (and even a mirror image of that scene, for it is now the man who's at the window). She wanted to connect with the running man, but failed. In the later scene, the girl achieves a serene, playful connection with a man that has been signaled out, ostracized, and attacked. It is a successful, albeit brief, contact with an other. The tragedy of the film is that this is the only glimpse of that success. At the end, the woman finds herself at the same balcony when she saw the first man. She cries, for now, she sees nothing. The balcony is empty. Yet besides their present sorrow, poignantly conveyed in the ending, Elío and García Ascot have crafted a sequence where the girl comes face to face with history – with an other attached to the events that will displace her – and a mutual recognition, however limited, happens. *En el balcón vacío* is a film that coaxes nostalgia to become a creative force and a form of engagement with the past's otherness.

I must end my discussion of García Ascot with a quick, almost off-handed moment from *En el balcón vacío*. If the film puts across the conceptions of nostalgia and otherness of García Ascot's poetry and criticism through cinematic means, I believe it also delivers a diminutive allegory for the process of poetic inquiry. In the first sequence, just before Gabriela looks out of her window at the fugitive, she is seen handling a pocket watch. The voice-over offers what amounts to an explanatory caption: "I was taking a watch apart, but I was afraid of getting in trouble, because it wasn't mine." In a film about accessing an irretrievable, unmasterable past

through poetic play, it is hard to think of a better image of the strange ability of language to manipulate time that we cannot possess. Gabriela recognizes the watch is not hers, and yet she disembowels it to learn from it, not through conventionally rigorous analysis, but curious play. The temporal shift in ekphrastic writing about the moving image seeks vividness and expression, but it is also always haunted by the irretrievability of the viewing experience. It seems to me all media criticism is nostalgic, largely because it is playing with time that does not belong to the writer.

3.2.3 On Foreignness and Poetic Film Criticism

Earlier in this chapter, I claimed the way Elizondo and de la Colina chose to defend *En el balcón vacío* was ill-advised as it tried to protect the film from something for which it did not need protection, namely, the worry that its thematic links to the Spanish Civil War and exile would overpower all discourse about it. But that might not have been so much a fear as a result of a Euro-American modernist tendency among cosmopolitan intellectuals. When speaking of accented cinemas, Naficy quotes Caren Kaplan's study of the role of displacement in modern literature. Kaplan argues that modernist Western writers actively sought displacement to yield "aesthetic gains" for their work. In other words, there might be something deliberate about the exilic condition:

Like all symbolic formations, Euro-American modernist exile culls meaning from various cultural, political, and economic sources, including lived experiences of people who have been legally and socially expelled from one location and prevented from returning. I will argue, however, that the modernist trope of exile works to remove itself from any political or historically specific instances in order to generate aesthetic categories and ahistorical values. The Euro-American formation "exile," then, marks a place of mediation in modernity where issues of political conflict, commerce, labor, nationalist

realignments, imperialist expansion, structures of gender and sexuality, and many other issues all become recoded.¹⁰⁶

Like other Euro-American modernist writers, the *Nuevo Cine* crew were after certain outcomes in their work. They “celebrate singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation, and aestheticized excisions of location in favor of locale – that is, the ‘artist in exile’ is never ‘at home,’ always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insights.”¹⁰⁷ What is key here is that Kaplan rethinks exile by distinguishing between those who were forced out of a nominal home (like the Spanish refugees) and those who have taken the condition of exile on purpose. Both groups might share the goal of artistic innovation, yet the former is, perhaps, more likely to be justifiably “melancholic and nostalgic about an irreparable loss and separation from the familiar or beloved,”¹⁰⁸ and thus more likely to have organically endeavored to grapple with their situation in their art. The latter, however, saw in what Naficy calls “the resulting tensions and ambivalences” of exile a means to reaching “the complexity and intensity that are so characteristic of great works of art.”¹⁰⁹ As Kaplan puts it,

unlike particular individuals who may experience all or some or none of these qualities, the *formation* of modernist exile seems to have best served those who would voluntarily experience estrangement and separation in order to produce the experimental cultures of modernism. That is, the Euro-American middle-class expatriates adopted the attributes of exile as an ideology of artistic production.¹¹⁰

Doubtlessly, there are intellectual benefits to displacement. Naficy, unknowingly binding Elizondo and García Ascot’s approaches to original writing and thinking (eroticism for one, nostalgia for the other), acknowledges it: “In the same way that sexual taboo permits procreation,

¹⁰⁶ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 27-28

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 12.

¹¹⁰ Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, 28.

exilic banishment encourages creativity.”¹¹¹ In Kaplan’s formulation, however, the banishment is not necessary to tap into the captivating possibilities of new perspectives. I want to go one step further and argue that, when it comes to the moving image, the critic does not even need to undertake geographical relocation to exploit its creative ore. The very act of film criticism can be one of deliberate displacement, particularly when the critic gets exposure to world media productions and, in cases like Mexico, the large majority of films come from abroad. A comparative, hybridizing, and expanding impulse takes place within the work of the intellectual inquiring, critically and artistically, both national and international cultures. *Nuevo Cine*’s cry for transformation of Mexican filmmaking was perceived by nationalist Mexican critics as a set of impositions from outsiders. Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz claims that “Buñuel’s greater contribution to Mexican cinema is perhaps to have initiated an articulate, critical strand, a new tradition” in Mexican film. But there were conditions internal to Mexico that made the change happen: the rise of an urban intellectual class that counted many Republican refugees within their ranks, the rise of poetry, and the industrial (and, for *Nuevo Cine*, artistic) decline of national cinema among others. Mexican intellectuals already looked outwards, and their film criticism turned poetic, in part, under the spell of those influences. They presented symptoms of displacement within their own territory, and mined that perspective for aesthetic and critical gains. For a Mexican-born writer like Elizondo, who arguably came of age intellectually overseas, the temptation of films he found resonant, interesting, and powerful sent him looking into foreign filmographies and literatures. Meanwhile, García Ascot wrote primarily about French and American (in the continental sense of the word) films, which were, for all intents and purposes, foreign to him whether he was in Mexico or Spain. Given that many of its members were literal exiles, thinking of *Nuevo Cine*’s contribution to a history of poetic investigation brings foreignness to the

¹¹¹ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 12.

foreground as a major engine of their inventiveness. It would be pertinent to remember, however, that it was an engine that also ran in the work of the early chroniclers and their successors. And I would argue that viewing, thinking, and producing knowledge about films from global cinemas demands that any critic, regardless of background, come up with creative writing solutions.

3.2.4 Cinema in Print: The Dispersion of *Nuevo Cine*

After six issues that covered the months between April 1961 and August 1962, including the special double issue on Buñuel, *Nuevo Cine* closed down (Aranzúbia calls the journal's brief but noteworthy life "a flameout").¹¹² Intended to be a bimonthly publication, by its sixth issue it was visibly struggling to keep up. With only a thousand copies in circulation for each issue and a limited audience, the group could only afford to keep the journal afloat so far. They certainly planned to continue. The final issue gave glimpses of the one that would have followed, like a page proudly announcing not just the completion and release of *En el balcón vacío*, but also that the script for the film would appear in the journal. I wonder if that would have become standard practice, or if they had gone as far as publishing unproduced screenplays as a form of poetry, like several French magazines were doing in the twenties as a way to keep their dreams of cinema alive. Those "oneiric confessions projected onto an imaginary screen"¹¹³ would have been right at home in *Nuevo Cine*.

But that next issue never materialized, sending its critics toward new projects. Elizondo hoped to continue, and intensify, experimental cultural criticism with a publication he founded himself in 1962, right after the demise of *Nuevo Cine*: a magazine defiantly called *S.nob*.

¹¹² Aranzúbia, "Nuevo Cine..." 101.

¹¹³ Georges Neveux, quoted in Richard Abel, "Exploring the Discursive Field of the Surrealist Film Scenario Text" in *Dada and Surrealist Film*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 58. It would not have been surprising, I believe, to find that *Nuevo Cine*'s writers would have started writing unfilmable scenarios, like the writers Abel references, had their journal lived a longer life.

Bringing *Nuevo Cine* alumni García Riera and de la Colina with him to edit content from voices like artist Leonora Carrington and Alejandro Jodorowski, Elizondo envisioned *S.nob* to be a playground for subversive pieces written with challenging irony and irreverence, like “brainy essays about incest and eating manure..., reviews of the inconveniences of lycanthropy, and recommendations... for how to avoid giving money to beggars.”¹¹⁴ As the reader can see, Elizondo kept his Surrealist attitude intact for *S.nob*, and gave it even freer rein by expanding the subjects of writing beyond cinema and into scatology and grotesquerie – although film was not off-limits. The magazine was to have “no selection criteria whatsoever.” *S.nob* would follow on *Nuevo Cine*’s steps and expire quickly, after seven issues spread across only five months, from June to October of 1962.

In the aftermath, a few members of the former *Nuevo Cine* crew had long and noteworthy careers in criticism and publishing, always with an eye toward cinema. I have listed some of Elizondo’s later works above. García Riera, *Nuevo Cine*’s most dedicated historian, had enormous and lasting impact with the mammoth *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano (A Documentary History of Mexican Cinema)*, a comprehensive overview that was first published in 1969 and would eventually count 18 volumes. As a professor at the Universidad de Guadalajara, he mentored a young Guillermo del Toro. De la Colina, meanwhile, collaborated with Tomás Pérez Turrent on a book of interviews: *Luis Buñuel: prohibido asomarse al interior* (1986).¹¹⁵ Published in English as *Objects of Desire: Conversations with Luis Buñuel*, it would make a logical, Spanish-language bedfellow to Truffaut’s *Hitchcock* (1983). Notable is also de la Colina’s recent collection of personal essays on cinema, *Un arte de fantasmas* (2014).

¹¹⁴ Antonio Ortuño, “Elizondo: una remembranza *S.nob*” in *Letras Libres*, February 8th, 2008, <http://www.letraslibres.com/blogs/elizondo-una-remembranza-snob>

¹¹⁵ In Spain, the book was published under the title *Buñuel por Buñuel (Buñuel by Buñuel)* (1993).

As for García Ascot, who continued writing poetry and essays, he left behind a revelatory final work, *La muerte empieza en Polanco*¹¹⁶ (*Death Begins in Polanco*, 1982). Like *Farabeuf* for Elizondo, *Polanco* is its author's one and only novel and, also like *Farabeuf*, it had cinematic genes. The book, a mixture of detective story and spy thriller, was released posthumously, and it features a unique protagonist: a film critic who makes a more profitable living as a private eye (a witty reversal: in the first decades of cinema, it was the job of film chronicler that supported the writers' other activities). Throughout the book, the central case, which revolves around a quarrel between the CIA and the KGB, unfailingly calls for the protagonist's cinephilia to follow the clues and navigate deadly situations by remembering how they played out in films. Not only did García Ascot take to literature to extend his interest in film, but he did so by making a keen memory of cinema's images a life-saving knowledge. After *Nuevo Cine*, some of its most prominent writers maintained their commitment to cinema in fiction. Looking for its impact in Mexican film culture, one must find its legacy scattered on pages that, appropriately, were fantasies. They continued, even decades later, tasking cinema with supplying them with visions.

¹¹⁶ Polanco is an affluent, culturally active neighborhood of Mexico City.

4.0 FOUNDING PROFESSORS

4.1 MONSTROUS MUSES, OR THE STRANGE CASE OF JOSÉ REVUELTAS

4.1.1 Introduction: José Revueltas, Film Theorist

Of all the writers discussed here, José Revueltas would seem to be an exception. He was never a figure in journalistic criticism circles; his prose, particularly in one of the books to which this section is dedicated, will strike the reader as didactic and explanatory rather than lyrical; he was also more deeply and frequently involved in filmmaking itself through his work as a screenwriter (and once as director) than any of the other figures in the chapters preceding this one and the section that follows. Most significantly, Revueltas was not a critic: I invoke him here as a theorist, and his book as perhaps the only volume mainly concerned with a theory of film ontology written in Mexico. And yet, he is relevant to this process not only as the hinge between pre-academic cinema studies and the still-in-the-works establishment of the discipline, but also because, in *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas (The Cinematographic Knowledge and Its Problems)* first published in 1965 and reprinted in 1985, Revueltas articulates, rehearses, and exposes more shades of the poetic ethos behind the tradition of criticism I define here. Given its rarity, its impact remains elusive, both in Mexican film thought and Mexican film production.

The impact, however, should be palpable or, at the very least, suspected. Revueltas rose to prominence and notoriety as a novelist and political essayist during the forties and fifties, and even though many writers acknowledge his screenwriting as an activity where his ideas are both

represented and transformed, further attention could be given to his articles on acting, montage, the place of cinema in the arts, and the films of his contemporaries in the history of Mexican cinema. Revueltas the Marxist militant and polemicist was a more active figure than Revueltas the film scholar. Interestingly, however, the last book he completed before he dedicated himself entirely to the 1968 Student Movement, and before he was imprisoned in the maximum security penitentiary of Lecumberri for his intellectual leadership of the protests, was in fact *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas*, putting this text in a unique position to both be potentially defining of Revueltas's later works and ideology and, paradoxically, to have been lost in critical thought about Revueltas amidst the more seemingly immediate turmoil brought about by the movement and his subsequent arrest and imprisonment.

El conocimiento cinematográfico, then, cries for reinspection, particularly since, as I will argue, there is a clear line binding Revueltas's last book before 1968 (*El conocimiento cinematográfico*) and his first, and perhaps most celebrated, literary work to emerge from his incarceration in Lecumberri: the novella *El apando*. A work about his experiences within the prison walls, it stands, beyond every film for which he served as scribe, producer or director (including the film adaptation of the book itself, co-scripted by Revueltas and directed by Felipe Cazals in 1975) as the most accomplished exposition and application of his ideas about cinema. Understanding both books as part of a continuum, and *El apando* as a literary extension and execution of his theoretical work, helps reveal how Revueltas formulates first an intelligible notion of poetic inquiry, and then enacts his own, novelistic brand of creative research into cinema, all the while speaking of the moving image and its analysis as forms of knowledge of a particular kind.

But before I begin underscoring the blood-relations between these two texts, let me clarify that Revueltas's film theory is not unitary, and trying to discover an unbroken argument in *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, slim as though the volume might be, could prove frustrating. For starters, the book is a collection of essays written both well before they were intended for joint publication (some as early as 1947, all of which were revised for the first edition) and essays aimed at rounding out some of his propositions to make them cogent for their appearance in book form. Perhaps more importantly, the tome was almost meant to act as a textbook, since Revueltas became, in 1963, one of the founding faculty members of the *Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos* (CUEC), the very first official school of cinema in Mexico, housed in its *Universidad Nacional Autónoma*. He came on board as a screenwriting professor, and although the book looks at many other areas of film production and engages in discussions of film ontology, history, and analysis, records show he primarily taught screenwriting.¹ Such emphasis is not unexpected, given his experience, but it also makes the book a hybrid between handbook and treatise, torn between instrumental pragmatism and speculation. Even though he tried to strike a balance between theory and practice, it is clear that several of his essays, particularly those about scriptwriting, do not always follow the theoretical concerns proposed in other pieces.

For instance, his almost Aristotelian approach to plot structure leaves little room for the writing of scripts in what might be called the art-cinema mode (which he defines, as we shall see, in terms strikingly reminiscent of Deleuze's time-image), which he highlights in other essays as the most recent (for his time) development in film language. In the article "*Problemas del guión cinematográfico*" ("Problems of the Film Screenplay"), he even avoids outlining the steps

¹ Marcela Fernández Violante, "Apéndice" in *La docencia y el fenómeno fílmico: memoria de los XXV años del CUEC, 1963-1988*, ed. Fernández Violante (Mexico City: UNAM, 1988), 125-126.

toward the composition of a script more interested in unconventional causality, preferring instead to give suggestions as to how such a script should be written. First, he carefully breaks down a scene from Camus's story "*La femme adultère*" into a series of shots, and then he explains in great detail (including diagrams and tables) how a more linear, directly causal script could emerge from it. His exposition of the "problems of screenwriting" through a process of literary adaptation establishes why a logical narrative structure dictated by the mechanics of external conflict might not work for scripts that try to express the interiority of tales like Camus's, and then the text refuses to actually enact the latter process. In other words, some articles feel more prescriptive and, as such, provide specific instructions for students to follow in their own projects, rather than inquire into the nature of cinema itself or of cinematography, direction, acting, or film analysis. Add to those essays others that directly address and openly critique contemporary conditions of Mexican film distribution and exhibition, and *El conocimiento cinematográfico* feels comprehensive and eclectic as the variously inspired book that it is, and not as a sustained, single argument.

So rather than trying to locate and encapsulate that argument and trace it into *El apando*, I pursue what in my view is the most consistent element of Revueltas's thoughts on the ontology of cinema: his theory of montage. It informs the rest of his propositions of what cinema is and can be, and when interacting with concepts on other aspects of film that Revueltas teases and delineates throughout the book, his conception of montage serves as the vector through which I see the central question of poetic film investigation in Mexico – the vacillation between thinking of cinema as a world for the critic to enter and inhabit in order to write about it, and imagining it as a phantom entity that the critic must let in so that it will speak through her. Also, it is through fleshing out Revueltas's theory of montage that its Baroque roots become most evident, where it

becomes apparent that he saw cinema, and its study, as exemplary of a Baroque *ethos* of learning and discovery.

4.1.2 How a Film Theorist Got Lost

Although biographical observations will appear throughout the forthcoming passages, I must take a detour here to frame how one can make sense of Revueltas's place in Mexican film history not only as the prolific screenwriter behind several of the most successful films of director Roberto Gavaldón, like *La otra* (1946), *La diosa arrodillada* (1947) and *El rebozo de Soledad* (1952) and one of Buñuel's best-known Mexican films, *La ilusión viaja en tranvía* (1954) – all made during the *Edad de Oro* – but also as a thinker and critic, and that means elaborating on his role as one of the first faculty members of the first official Mexican film school. It was his participation in the birth of CUEC (which turned fifty in June 2013) that largely inspired his writing of his book on cinema, and it is the path towards the consolidation of that school as an important, even necessary, institution (and, by extension, the affirmation of cinema's significance for Mexican cultural life) that Revueltas helped open.

CUEC started, in the words of Manuel González Casanova, the Center's first director, as an "impossible dream" that had "no valid antecedents" or models to follow towards its establishment.² He declares that the "importance of cinema in the life of the contemporary human," and the notion that film is "one of the great means of education available to us, since its pedagogy extends to all social levels and all ages and is particularly influential within groups with limited schooling," fueled his efforts to provide college-level courses to form future filmmakers who would also become future teachers. The first step, in 1960, was to draft "50 lessons on film production" and, in 1962, "lessons on film analysis" – the first gasps for air of a

² Manuel González Casanova, "El CUEC: un 'sueño' imposible" in *La docencia y el fenómeno fílmico*, 31-32

Cinema Studies curriculum. To implement them, Casanova enlisted names who were “excellent in their specialties, but improvised as teachers,” among them “the unforgettable Pepe Revueltas,” who taught screenwriting. With a base faculty and a first class of students who “made up for the Center’s early shortcomings with great persistence and enthusiasm,” Casanova and his team began their enterprise from “absolute zero.”³

González Casanova’s remembrance is interesting for how it both matches in some ways, and contrasts in others, with what Revueltas would eventually embody, both in his book and as a key player in the lasting life of both the film school he helped found, and perhaps of cinema itself in Mexico. First is the erroneous statement that Revueltas was an “improvised teacher” when he joined CUEC – he had, in fact, been a film professor before, at Cuba’s prestigious ICAIC (like García Ascot), where he imparted courses starting in 1961. Second are Casanova’s repeated claims that the Center was willed into existence from scratch. Casanova is right to point out the lack of existing systems to exemplify how film instruction would work at the university, just as he pertinently highlights the difficulties and achievements in attempting something that, for its context, was in fact unprecedented. At the same time, a look at a list of faculty members shows a certain regard for the recent past – namely, the fact that the center recruited practically all the members of *Nuevo Cine*, the people responsible for the journal revisited in the previous chapter: Salvador Elizondo, Carlos Monsiváis, Emilio García Riera, José de la Colina... all taught courses in film history and film analysis, many of them intermittently, during the earliest years of the Center.⁴ The forum they had opened up had moved into the university, as they had

³ Ibid, 32.

⁴ Marcela Fernández Violante, “Apéndice,” 125-126.

hoped it would, and so they lay the foundations for their teaching and the first expression of the school's curricular philosophy.⁵

I take Casanova's seeming omission of the school's genealogy outside of an academic setting (even if the faculty did reflect some historical continuity) to be not so much an example of Mexican film thought's short term memory (one against which González Casanova himself warned his readers), but symptomatic of an inability, in the 1960s, to reconcile the amateur (in both senses of the word) culture of *Nuevo Cine* with a vision of the academy that sought to instrumentalize and systematize knowledge. Just because CUEC drafted the authors of the most coherent panorama of film knowledge (or at least the one that had a semblance of coherence as it developed under the single roof of a journal), thus importing their attitudes toward the cinema into the burgeoning academic field, does not mean the import was smooth. As Jorge Ayala Blanco characterizes the initial approaches to courses on film history and analysis, the groping in the dark took the shape of an "*afrancesadamente documentada*" ('Frenchly' documented) cinephilia that was barely self-aware and conscious of its condition as the origin of a cinematic literacy." It often consisted of "uncritical readings of Sadoul's *History of Film*" or "the pedantic construction of pipe dreams based on an up-to-date translation of the latest issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*." By the 1970s, the eccentric, Gallic-flavored sources that CUEC's early professors deployed – playful, counterhistorical, personal, epigrammatic, poetic – became "suspicious of stagnation and onanism," and was quickly superseded, in terms of student interest and the Center's own administrative priorities, by film production.⁶ Film theory appeared too amorphous

⁵ Fernández Violante, "Gabriel García Márquez: México, el cine mexicano y el CUEC" in *La docencia y el fenómeno fílmico*, 27-28. In this interview with filmmaker and CUEC professor Fernández Violante, García Márquez, an influential figure in Mexican cinema of the 1960s (among his contributions was the screenplay for the 1965 release *Tiempo de morir*, Arturo Ripstein's debut feature) recalls how his friends from *Nuevo Cine* all continued their film-critical work as teachers in CUEC.

⁶ Jorge Ayala Blanco, "Historia y Análisis del cine en el CUEC" in *La docencia y el fenómeno fílmico*, 81-82.

to be significant, and thus the subject of “‘history of film language’ was born,” a strictly chronological and normative study of the evolution of film form meant to serve as the theoretical support for the practical courses on editing, cinematography, direction and screenwriting, which now could find their roots in a set of clearly defined traditions of world cinema, be them documentary, narrative, or experimental.⁷ Ayala Blanco calls this stage, which in his own classes limited the student’s work to “the image itself,” a far more “sustainable” interpretation of what the critical track of cinema studies for CUEC should be.⁸ Perhaps Casanova is right, and the change from a cinephile journal to a university classroom roster rendered continuity impossible – film studies had to find its academic skin. The *Nuevo Cine* forefathers did not seem to provide a solid connective tissue.

In this regard, Revueltas did not disagree, at least not visibly so in his cinema book: he too believed in a unified, and unifying, pedagogy of cinema as a language to replace the contentious, unwieldy classes driven by French-laced cinephilia. In his move toward teaching a formalist history that demanded greater structure and methodological discipline, Revueltas turned to Eisenstein and his early theories of montage, giving readers one of the earliest usages, in Mexico and in book form, of film theory for docent purposes: “Two pieces of film of any kind – going back to Eisenstein – placed together, inevitably combine in a new concept, a new quality, which emerges from their juxtaposition.”⁹ Revueltas reduces (and, as we will see later, modifies) Eisenstein’s ideas somewhat, enshrining in particular the notion of juxtaposition of elements for the generation of a dialectical synthesis as the essence of cinematic creation. Yet the questions of film language led Revueltas to grapple with the nature of the medium itself in an

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁹Sergei Eisenstein, quoted in José Revueltas, *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas* (Mexico City: Era, 1985), 26. (Henceforth *ECC*).

attempt to explain why cinema as he knew it had to eventually unfold as it did, and why it had to adopt the communication strategies that he considered most accomplished. Revueltas, a militant Marxist, believed the elaboration of a theoretical framework, a deep sense of self, was vital for any artistic and political activity, so a film poetics needed a core rationale. Thus he formulated how filmmakers from several areas of production, from editing to acting, and critics, could sharpen the tools of their craft on the whetstone of his insight that film itself is a dialectical synthesis. To corroborate such theory, Revueltas writes,

[w]e need only examine the mechanical principle on which cinema is based: the intermittent succession of still images... Hence, from the moment of its birth, from the moment in which it is discovered, cinema is, in itself, a dialectical synthesis of two opposing values: immobility-mobility, which yields a new value within which the oppositions are condensed and identified: *the direction of movement*.¹⁰

Yet Revueltas finds that even though it is fundamentally a juxtaposition, as cinema “develops beyond being a mechanical and ‘curious’ device to become an artistic one, it discovers and conquers new categories of synthesis, new categories of condensation, until reaching its current state of pure synthetizing art.”¹¹ It is the description of these new categories that will concern film criticism.

El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas could’ve been a textbook for CUEC’s faculty. In it, he presents a thematic segmentation of cinema, covering topics like its position among the arts, the relationship between editing and screenwriting and between the script and the actor, the problems of film analysis and the present and future of Mexican cinema, all based around a conceptual understanding of cinema’s ontology that had a source (Eisenstein) and an appropriation in Revueltas’s own words. Revueltas realized that there was no need to start from absolute zero, as everything is too cold at that temperature: Eisenstein had already provided a

¹⁰ Revueltas, *ECC*, 18 (his emphasis).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

way to compose an academic program, one that had all the makings of a viable theory of praxis, of thoughts that could be turned into films. Revueltas even provided a historical component tied to the intersecting modernization of the novel. In the mid-sixties, observes Revueltas, “cinema once again needs the novel,” since after emulating the latter’s nineteenth century incarnation in the 1920s, cinema had to reassess and expand its field of inquiry to match the novel’s inevitable “abandonment of itself to become more itself.”¹² Novelists performed this desertion/reassertion process in books like the novels from the *Nouveau roman* movement, for example, itself a rich source of invention for filmmakers in the sixties. In a division of cinema’s progression that’s astonishingly similar (if comparatively embryonic) to Deleuze’s transition from the movement-image to the time-image, or from sensory-motor causality to affect, Revueltas claims that as films grew more willing to probe into its subjects like a modern novelist would explore internal affective states, the more evident the poetics of montage became. The placing together of objects, people, and landscapes demanded fresh ingenuity and artistry in the choice of elements and the manner of their encounter to convey, in true Eisensteinian fashion, a univocal message. Therefore,

[t]here is, in this which we call *film-novel* [*cine-novela*], a certain, specific disregard of action, the same way in which, in the contemporary novel (let alone Joyce’s *Ulysses*, naturally), the *succeeding* [*el sucederse*,” both “a taking place” and “a following”] is not the same as it was in the past, as in *The Charterhouse of Parma* or *Madame Bovary* or in Balzac (oh, those delicious recapitulations, “as the reader will remember”). Instead, refer to *As I Lay Dying*... by Faulkner or *Manhattan Transfer* by Dos Passos for examples.

There is, then, a different *succeeding*, a new unfolding, which disposes of action only in its old forms (“the new eye requires a new action” are John Gabriel Borkman’s approximate words in Ibsen’s piece). To be precise, a succeeding that is less dependent on visible action than on an *internal* happening of the drama, or, in other words, where the conflicted relationships become less visible, less subordinated to the formal and exterior simplicity of such happenings. That explains the common nature shared by films

¹² Ibid., 94.

like *La strada*, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, and *L'Avventura*, despite their being so different from one another.¹³

Revueltas constructs his own versions of film history and film analysis, one which gives great congruence to the development of film grammar without limiting it to stylistic tropes.

Except Revueltas, according to the records, never took part in a course on film history or film analysis while at CUEC. The unforgettable “*Pepe*,” with his large spectacles protruding from in between a leonine mane and an imposing beard, only taught screenwriting courses in 1963 and 1964.¹⁴ Accounts make little to no mention of the impact his book or teachings had on the curricula of the critical/historical courses. It would appear the theories offered in his writings scarcely touched CUEC’s curriculum beyond his brief tenure.¹⁵

The omission might strike the reader versed in Revueltas’s tumultuous life as part of a pattern of confrontation and breakage. Throughout his radical political life, Revueltas entered and was subsequently excommunicated from a parade of parties and organizations with which he eventually clashed, including Mexico’s Communist Party and the *Consejo Nacional de Huelga* (National Strike Council), both of which he accused of a lack of vision and an unwillingness to agree on the theories of thought that would ground their actions. Some of these ruptures had to do with his frequent prison stints, culminating in his arrest, in 1968, for being identified as one of the masterminds behind the Student Movement (another French-inspired endeavor, this time in the events of May 1968) in favor of the National University’s intellectual and pedagogical freedom. The movement was savagely repressed when then President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz ordered the Mexican military to open fire on the student protesters on October 2nd. The Tlatelolco Massacre, thus named for the neighborhood in which it occurred, remains one of the

¹³ Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁴ Fernández Violante, “Apéndice,” 125.

¹⁵ Ibid.

most devastating moments in modern Mexican history. Revueltas would not engage in politics quite as visibly after his release in the wake of Tlatelolco in 1970, and while he would eventually be recognized for his uncompromising intellectualism and remembered as a guiding light during violent times, his associations, both outside and inside the academy, were often marred by conflict and disagreement.

But while he did not write other pieces of film theory after his arrest, his engagement with film thought (rather than filmmaking) did not end there: as a political prisoner in Lecumberri, Revueltas would produce *El apando*, a work that powerfully encapsulated his theory of the cinema in prose-fiction form. Despite his own attempt at systematizing film studies, with which he would have certainly parted had he continued being a film scholar, Revueltas's ultimate film-theoretical legacy is perhaps found in a personal, *sui generis* novella, one that, in the following sections, will emerge as the ultimate realization of his cinematic ideals. That the film adaptation of this work, directed by Felipe Cazals and scripted by Revueltas himself and José Agustín, did not quite manage to fulfill Revueltas's vision, further emphasizes how Revueltas's innovations in film thought remain in a latent state.

4.1.3 Submitting to Cinema's Wholeness: Revueltas and the Universality of Cinema

In order to describe in more detail how Revueltas's ideas on cinema were first articulated in *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, and later found a wholly poetic expression in the novella *El apando* only four years later, it is necessary to go back to his screenwriting years, for they proved formative in a rather curious fashion: even though he was brought on to teach for CUEC precisely because of his experience as a film scribe, Revueltas does not base his theories of film poetics entirely on his filmmaking years. More importantly, Revueltas writes his book on film theory from a perspective that tries to keep up with what he perceived was the evolution of

cinema – an evolution that had raised new questions about film style the films he scripted could not answer, as in his view, cinema, like the novel, had turned inwards by the sixties. Ramírez Berg observes that Revueltas, in the essay titled “¿*Qué es el cinedrama?*” (“What is a Screenplay?”) – a piece included in *El conocimiento cinematográfico* – defined screenwriting technique during the *Edad de Oro* (Revueltas’s most active period) in terms of the classical Hollywood stylistic paradigm as understood by David Bordwell. In that essay, “Revueltas revealed... that classical Mexican films, like their classic Hollywood counterparts, followed a linear trajectory, moving in an orderly fashion from one scene to the next in a steady cause-and-effect chain.” In Revueltas’s words, as translated by Ramírez Berg, “dramatic construction is the logical enchaining of acts [and] their accumulation... until they reach a culmination.”¹⁶ According to Ramírez Berg, Revueltas’s idea of the screenplay bears all the hallmarks of narrative causality, external conflict, and plot development.

Ramírez Berg’s translation of Revueltas, however, makes two significant assumptions, born from his use of David Bordwell’s writing as interpretant. Firstly, nowhere in the essay does Revueltas refer explicitly to the Hollywood paradigm as the model for Mexican filmmakers. The connection might be undeniable, and Ramírez Berg also recognizes that the *Edad de Oro* was not simply an imitation, but an accented, localized variation on the classic Hollywood style. But his characterization of Revueltas’s take on screenwriting suggests that, given the author’s relevance to Mexican filmmaking of the forties and fifties, he is speaking for all Mexican filmmakers. Instead, Revueltas sets out to compose a proscriptive document of screenwriting technique. He is writing about how he believes screenwriting should work everywhere rather than exposing specifically how *Edad de Oro* filmmakers operated or what was their dominant influence.

¹⁶ Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude*, 16.

Secondly, since Ramírez Berg cites only the *cinedrama* essay, the reader is unable to reconcile Revueltas's views in that essay with the rest of the pieces in the book, particularly with his stated realization that new questions on film style had been raised in the years since his most active screenwriting days. Alert to the changes that post-World War II cinema had prompted (changes that, as mentioned above, he did not trace back to the devastation of war, but to a rediscovery of the modern novel), Revueltas goes beyond the terms of logical causality that Ramírez Berg's analysis locates. Revueltas's theory of the screenplay applied not only to films written while inspired by the forms of Aristotelian poetics and the nineteenth-century realist novel – both of which continue to lie at the base of mainstream cinema – but also to the affectively sensitive, internally-oriented filmmaking of what Deleuze called “the time-image,” the kind of film most readily associated with post-War European art cinema. (In fact, the *cinedrama* essay, along with another piece in the book on adaptation, might constitute a partial draft for a screenwriting handbook dedicated to how to craft art film screenplays, as opposed to the countless manuals, by names like Syd Field and Robert McKee, on the structure of mainstream film screenwriting).¹⁷ As a result, his examples for screenplay construction range from John Ford's *How Green Was my Valley* (1941) to Marcel Carné's *Le quai de brumes* (1938). Revueltas might have scripted essays in precisely the Hollywood mode during the decades prior to his theoretical work, but when he sat down to write *El conocimiento cinematográfico* in the early sixties, the face of cinema had morphed and he hoped to reflect the shift. While he definitely brings his years as a wordsmith for the screen to bear, *El conocimiento*

¹⁷ See Robert McKee, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York: Regan Books, 1997). I might clarify that McKee places art cinema's tendency toward ambiguity, non-traditional causality or coincidence within his schema, and sees them all as part of a spectrum where causality, dramatic conflict and active protagonists are more or less present.

cinematográfico already looks elsewhere to articulate what it means to approach the world through cinema.

The reader must not conclude, from Ramírez Berg's mention of Revueltas, that there is a continuity and wholeness to the latter's ideas on cinema. However, there are two notions that come closest to being unifying principles in Revueltas's book. The first is his idea that cinema as a medium truly afforded the possibility of articulating a universal language. "*¿Qué es el cinedrama?*" is the last essay in the book, and it ends by predicting "cinema must be, and will be, the noblest vehicle of knowledge and comprehension for every human being on the planet." The conviction that cinema could fulfill the messianic task of erasing Babel's consequences animates *El conocimiento cinematográfico* and leads Revueltas to draw many of his conclusions. While Revueltas is not alone among theorists in this belief (the aforementioned Horacio Quiroga and Cube Bonifant, and other figures like Béla Balázs and Walter Benjamin), it is noteworthy for my project in that Revueltas pairs the messianic role with an understanding of what a film viewer is, and how from the two ideas, the ground for the generation of poetic inquiry is laid out. In other words, Revueltas's ideal viewer and how she engages with cinema prepares her to become a critic-poet – or, more specifically, to write with a cinema-fugal goal in mind, to invent from cinema's inspiration, in manners that differ from Ray's heurctic project.

Who is this viewer? According to the essay "*Problemas del guión cinematográfico*" ("Problems of the Screenplay"), the second one in the book, it is a "spectator" (*espectador*), which is a different species from "the public" (*público*) or "audience." The latter "is an unconditioned entity that expects the utter submission of a show to its demands, at a bullfight, a boxing match, a play, or a film showing: these are the people who are hoping to be entertained in some way or another." By contrast, the spectator

is a willingly conditioned entity (and here I consider the listener of music a spectator) and who attends the spectacle – even if that means reading a novel – with a certain, predetermined submission, which is by no means uncritical because it is an intelligent submission that knows *it will be reciprocated in turn*. The spectator is thus free when choosing to submit, but ceases to be so when it turns into an audience – that is, as soon as it transforms into a master that cannot stop ruling, that is obligated to rule, that alienates itself to the enslaving task of ruling.¹⁸

And, in the same essay, Revueltas impresses that the spectator submits to a film because

[t]he *information* that the screen will supply to the spectator must always be strictly and invariably *univocal*, that is, not subject to any other interpretation save for the necessary one, which is in itself inevitable. This fundamental principle cannot be altered and it must be observed in each and every stage of the production of a film, from the hints that originate a perception, the perceptions that form an image¹⁹ and the images that produce a notion, to the notions that make a concept.²⁰

In short, the spectator submits because the film, when fully accomplished, provides only one possible series of responses.

Revueltas does not explain further what he means by the reciprocity of the spectacle, but I find the concept a useful springboard for an argument for film as a heuritic source and the precursor of imagination. If, as Revueltas hopes, cinema does supersede the word, how does the information it conveys (aesthetically, narratively, and thematically) yield to the submissive spectator? Revueltas's ideal film would succeed in its attempt at utter coherence and clarity, which would seem to cancel the possibility of interpretation and interrogation that several writers (Barthes comes to mind) might consider the submission of the text to the reader and her emergence as author. To put it another way, Revueltas's films are not like Umberto Eco's "open texts,"²¹ but seem rather hermetic if they reach the level of completion Revueltas desires.

¹⁸ Revueltas, *ECC*, 59 (my emphasis).

¹⁹ "Image" for Revueltas is not the contents of a frame but, as I will elaborate later, the evoked image, the imaginary result of viewing. In this passage, "hints" take the place of concrete images and "perceptions" are the inflections given to the hints by the *mise-en-scène*.

²⁰ Revueltas, *ECC*, 57 (his emphasis).

²¹ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 9.

Therefore, *Revueltas*'s "spectator" is not Eco's "Model Reader,"²² – the film, ideally, would answer all its questions. So what can the spectator do if the film's message is clear? There would be no place within the text for the viewer to immerse herself. And here I see, in *Revueltas*, a rebellion against the metaphor of film as constitutive of a world that the viewer can enter. Instead, *Revueltas* asks that the spectator move on from the film to pursue whatever endeavors the latter might inspire. If the form of those endeavors is writing, then the writing would display "a relaxation of the explanatory drive," in Ray's words, since it will not try to return to the film, but to build something in the film's wake. At this point, we will recall the specters of the chroniclers, who leave the screen and come to the viewer, and García Ascot's defense of performances that "impose" themselves upon the audience. The anti-colonial approach to film spectatorship continues in *Revueltas*.

Yet the question of reciprocity remains, particularly for the critic, a specific kind of spectator whose job is to build something from cinema. The impenetrable film described above appears to be rather unyielding, and thus impervious to reciprocity – *Revueltas*'s conception of the yielding of the film must then be different from Ray's, who takes it from Carlo Ginzburg's exhortation to "squeeze the evidence," or to look at it closely "until it yields some precious information that has been hidden." Ray cites other examples of similar interrogations of details, like Walter Benjamin's musings on how one might remember more clearly, and learn more from, bits like the ruffles in a dress or a faded stamp than from works and pages explicitly intended to impart knowledge.²³ The detail is a valuable element for much of current cinephile criticism and scholarship on cinephilia in English-language cinema studies, where a gesture, an incidental happening on the frame, or the choice of a prop that appears to be just part of the background

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ Robert Ray, "Film Studies and the Problems of the New Century," 114-115.

launch illuminating reflections into the filmmaking process, or on topics that the film has brought together and whose connections the scholar is able to mine for knowledge.²⁴ With Revueltas, we get quite the opposite. It is the full, the complete, the unitary that concerns him, and his hope is not that the parts will yield, but that the spectator yields to the whole film.²⁵ The question then shifts to how a film that has the solidity of directness, internal congruence, and wholeness give way to the spectator once the spectator has given way to it. If we assume Revueltas thinks of a film as a whole unit (and I believe he does), the incomplete entity in the equation is, thus, the viewer – the creature with room within it to allow the film to enter it. It is not the film that’s a world, but the viewer, and as the spectator submits to remaining open, the film must submit to enter the spectator at the spectator’s conjuring, as if in a mediumistic relationship. And if the task at hand is the description of a film for the purposes of criticism – or, as Adrian Martin has recently observed (in a way that resonates with Revueltas’s implied assertion that a film must explain itself), criticism is really about the *redescription* of a film, since cinema, per Pascal Bonitzer, is able to “represent and narrate, figure and show simultaneously”²⁶ – then the mediumistic nature of the connection becomes literalized. If a film describes itself already through itself, then the critic-as-medium does her work by letting the film redescribe itself through her, in the act of cracked ventriloquism that recalls scenes of possession. The language and voice of the medium are altered by their guest. The medium’s syntax, tone, diction, are all shaped and informed by the presence within.

²⁴ In the Introduction, I listed Ray’s *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood* as an example of the writing the method of what Pound also called “the luminous detail” might produce. See also Keathley’s *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees*.

²⁵ To my mind, the closest Mexican letters have come to a conceptualization of the method of the luminous detail is perhaps the aforementioned work of Ricardo Garibay and his notion of *paradero literario*: an impression of that which is described so vivid, it must be acknowledged in contemplation. Compare that definition to Paul Willemen’s “cinephiliac moment,” or an element in a film “which resists, which escapes existing networks of critical discourse and theoretical frameworks.” See Willemen, “Through a Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered” in *Looks and Frictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 231.

²⁶ Quoted in Adrian Martin, “Incursions,” 56.

The implications of how Revueltas produces a vision of cinema where the question of elucidation seems to be rendered moot – the idea that cinema speaks to everyone and that everyone could potentially emerge from a film screening with the exact same understanding of the piece – makes poetic investigation inescapable. If there is no need to explain a film, to analyze it, wouldn't writing about it inevitably depart from it and, thus, invent the issues it is bringing to the film? And what to do with the words of written poetic inquiry when a medium that already overcomes language barriers is available? Wouldn't film impart its knowledge already, without a critic's help? Again, Revueltas does not practice, nor does he argue for, the epigrammatic, experimental writing that I have been exploring – his book is the one, from the texts included here, that could be considered purely theoretical with any degree of accuracy based on genre expectations – but *El conocimiento cinematográfico* does argue for knowledge itself as a poetic enterprise. When writing about a work of cinema, which is not language-bound and can speak for itself, what the writer does is report on what the work moved her to write, producing knowledge about her muse-like encounter with the piece rather than about the piece itself. By conceiving of cinema as an ideal, universal conveyor of meaning, Revueltas hints at where poetic investigations begin: from the need to say something after watching a film whose totality demands creation rather than decoding.

Revueltas will return, in his novella *El apando*, to constructing his concept of the spectator and how her greatest freedom (her greatest possibility to innovate, to invent, and recreate) lies in allowing cinema to wash over her through the development of an ecstatic gaze. But that concept is inextricable from the question of how a film achieves the solidity, wholeness and unity that allows it to possess the spectator. It is a concept that will find a literary expression in *El apando* and was first conceived in *El conocimiento cinematográfico*. Which brings me to

the second organizing principle in Revueltas's book, and that is his idea that the film image (or, rather, the combination of writing, acting, *mise-en-scène* and editing – in short, the visual text) is secondary to its effects. Recalling Bazin's classification of filmmakers in two faiths, it is safe, on first glance, to place Revueltas alongside believers in the image. Again, poetic investigation is possible because a film, for Revueltas, produces thoughts that are expressed but ultimately left unarticulated – the raw material for further writing. These are film's "images" – not the objects populating the frame, but the imaginings populating the viewer's reaction to the frames. In the first chapter of his book, "*El lugar del cine en el arte*" ("The Place of Cinema Among the Arts"), Revueltas executes a move reminiscent of Rudolph Arnheim's "New Laocoön" in *Film as Art*,²⁷ arguing that all arts share their objectives, but accomplish them through different means. But to argue that, he first compares cinema to other art forms by looking at the images they create:

The "images" of the cinematograph, if one takes the word "image" in its most general and abstract sense, as certain genre of knowledge representation, are no different, in essence, from an aesthetic point of view, to the images of poetry, painting, or the novel. The organizing principle is the same; the system, let us say, of the transubstantiation of elements, does not differ: bread and wine turn into flesh and blood at the behest of an identical emotional miracle.²⁸

And, to demonstrate, Revueltas exhorts us to "take, at random, a few verses from Quevedo:"

Decir puede este río,
Si hay quien diga en favor de un desdichado
El tierno llanto mío.

[This river can speak,
If there be someone who in this wretch's favor may
Of my tender cry...]²⁹

Revueltas is interested not in the "written words, but in the words that have been heard" – that is, the images between and after the written images, the ones that are felt rather than read – in this

²⁷ Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 199

²⁸ Revueltas, *ECC*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

case, the “pure miracle” of the poet’s river of tears, his infinite and tender sorrow, rising, for the reader, to the surface of the geological river the poem describes.³⁰ In achieving this communion of the concrete image and its intangible affective shadow, Quevedo’s words are “imbued with the magical duality of flesh and spirit” that Revueltas also locates in André Maurois’s contention that a writer’s work is “not to describe impossible worlds, but to evoke and clarify the true world.”³¹ “True,” not “real,” for it is a world that erases the mind-body dichotomy by occupying every level of being.

But Quevedo’s fusion of apparently opposing values is only the first example in a history of cinema that begins with a desire for unity, Revueltas’s first condition for the determination of beauty in art (the wholeness of the film that can then possess the spectator). He first finds it in St. Augustine’s writings on poetry, which say magnificence consists of “unity, as in everything that is beautiful.”³² Revueltas suspects Augustine favors unity as an extension of his belief in one God, Himself a tripartite concordance. He hunts it through Hegel’s dialectics and Heraclitus’s principles (by way of French philosopher Alfred Jules Émile Fouillée) of “eternal instability and stability of that instability,”³³ or the idea that nothing is permanent and change is the only constant. Indeed, for Revueltas, film’s technology determines its destiny as the “pure synthetic art,” as it embodies the stability of instability in its production of movement from stillness. The technical principle that made cinema happen as Revueltas knew it is in itself a dialectic synthesis of the opposing values of motionlessness and motion.³⁴

With such an intellectual bloodline, it seems inevitable that Revueltas’s genealogy would eventually land on Eisenstein, the film theorist proper with which Revueltas aligns himself most

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

³² Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

³³ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

frequently throughout his book. In fact, much like Eisenstein, Revueltas finds montage everywhere in art, culminating in his quoting of Rilke's remarks on Rodin's sculpture:

The same way in which the human body alone is for Rodin a whole while a common action (*interior or exterior*) keeps all its parts and forces moving, parts of different bodies organize in a single organism, on their own, as they adhere to one another due to an intimate necessity. A hand perches on another's back or a thigh no longer belongs to the body from which it came: it and the object it touches or grabs shape a new thing, one which does not have a name and which belongs to no one; and the work is now about this particular thing which has defined limits.³⁵

When the bodies in Rodin's work touch each other, like "a hand placed on someone's back or someone's thigh, it does not belong to the body from which it came, but it makes, with the other body, its own thing," a "thing without a name" that montage produces.

It is important, however, to understand that even though Revueltas expresses agreement with Eisenstein's theories, the former's appropriation of the latter requires further elaboration, for it harbors a conception of cinema that reappears, in prose-fiction form, in *El apando*, and that could also assist in describing some recent trends in filmmaking, Mexican and otherwise. It is in Revueltas's assimilation of Eisenstein where a reconsideration of Baltasar Gracián's Old World Baroque and the Neobaroque strategies outlined by thinkers like Severo Sarduy, Haroldo de Campos, and Irlemar Chiampi become useful vectors to inscribe Revueltas's theories into the tradition of poetic inquiry. The Neobaroque attitude places his work, as represented by *El conocimiento cinematográfico* and *El apando*, as a poetically-minded intervention in a history of inquiries into film ontology. At the same time, besides supporting echoes of the idea of the ghost as muse from chapter one, Revueltas introduces another creature to describe cinema as a muse: the monster. A detailed interrogation of his theories of montage is in order.

³⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, quoted in *ibid.*, 26 (my emphasis).

4.1.4 Devouring Eisenstein: Baroque Monstrosity and Revueltas's Montage

Revueltas asserts the centrality of montage to his project, and the Baroque origins of his cinematic thought, in the very first essay in the book, "*El lugar del cine en el arte*," and as early as the second paragraph. A first reading of the entire book reveals that first essay to be an appropriately enticing opener. Straight away Revueltas references Soviet montage: "[A]rt," Revueltas explains, "is a phenomenon that transforms quantity into quality," and then goes on to quote Sergei Eisenstein's elucidation that "quantity and quality are not different properties of a phenomenon, but only different aspects of the same phenomenon."³⁶ In considering that all arts are based on such a synthetic process, which he will later call montage, Revueltas turns to metaphor to illustrate that "the kind of synthesis art represents implies a combination of opposites, the fusion of opposing values; in a word, a certain kind of monstrosity, as if the artist were consummating incest with nature."³⁷ In the last sentence, Revueltas conflates montage (the process of synthesis) with a Baroque conceit (monstrosity).

Of course, the evocative use of monstrosity as a concept here has implications beyond the Baroque origins I believe animate Revueltas's thought on the moving image. First, there's the immediate impact of stating just how risky art in general and cinema in particular can be. I like to imagine that he might have greeted his students at CUEC with such a take on the work on which they wished to embark, inspiring them toward transgression rather than a more predictably noble pursuit (which Revueltas ultimately believes cinema to be, never missing an opportunity to tout the messianic status he predicts it could hold). A famous cartoon drawing of Revueltas by cartoonist Rogelio Naranjo (another important figure in the 1968 Movement) portrays Revueltas's features – long hair that blends with an equally monumental beard – holding a rifle

³⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

in one hand that morphs into a fountain pen at the end of the barrel. While the reader might see in this drawing a misleading association of Revueltas with violence, Naranjo does capture how seriously Revueltas took writing, literature, and the arts and their convulsive, transformative power. His linking of art with monstrosity and incest certainly betrays his awareness and embracing of the danger inherent in their practice.

Another implication of Revueltas's monstrosity is its contradiction of Stephen Mulhall's Heideggerian critique of cinema. Heidegger fears that in the "age of technology," the natural world becomes "a store of resources and raw materials for human purposes," a vision that Heidegger, significantly, calls "enframing." Putting something on a frame is one of cinema's fundamental tasks, and given that those tasks involve technology, cinema sees humans themselves as an exploitable resource (it frames them) and records them automatically. With that in mind, "it is not difficult to imagine," says Mulhall, "that the technological basis of film might inherently tend towards the elimination of the human."³⁸ When Revueltas calls cinema a monstrosity, the spawn of incest with nature, he irrevocably binds it to its human and, more importantly, natural progenitors. Even if the monstrous results of a perversion of nature could be described as non-human, Revueltas's equation inscribes both film and the human in the natural world (only by being part of nature can the human consummate incest with it), thus ensuring its inability to negate either.

Alas, Revueltas might not have in fact exhorted his students to commit incest with nature and give birth to monstrosities in his pedagogy, considering those words are something of a volatile piece of the essay in question. The article, though the first one in the book, was not the first one he wrote of the pieces collected there. It was originally a lecture he delivered, first during a seminar for the Film Writers' Guild in September of 1946, and then at the Palace of

³⁸ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 42.

Fine Arts in the occasion of the Mexican premiere of Fridrikh Ermler's Soviet film *The Turning Point* in 1947. It was later published in *Cultura Soviética*, the journal of the Institute of Cultural Exchange between Mexico and the Soviet Union.³⁹ Revueltas revised it for inclusion in the first edition of *El conocimiento cinematográfico* in 1965, and surprisingly, that edition excised the comparison between art, incest, and monstrosity (it would later be restored when Era Publishing reprinted the book in 1985, nearly ten years after Revueltas's death).

In short, the initial incarnation of the text occurred well outside the context of Revueltas's more regular pedagogical work in the mid-sixties (the one aimed at students, not at people who were filmmakers already), and when the essay first appeared in the book, at the end of the author's tenure at CUEC, Revueltas had been teaching screenwriting, not film history or criticism, where such ideas might be more predictably at home. It is certainly likely that he used many of his ideas on film and art in his screenplay courses, but the editors of *El conocimiento* note that Revueltas composed three other essays in the volume specifically as theoretical content for his classes: the aforementioned "*Problemas del guión cinematográfico*," "*Cómo procede la película*" ("How a Film Proceeds") and "*La integración cinematográfica en el montaje a partir del fotograma*" ("The Cinematic Integration of Montage from the Photogram"). Neither monstrosity nor incest are brought up in any of these essays. Its reappearance, however, highlights how much that idea irrigates Revueltas's text: first, it is representative of the strangeness of *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, a rarity in Mexican letters even for the editors of Revueltas's complete works, who place it in the "Miscellany" category of a collection that includes his literary oeuvre (the novels and short story collections) and his theoretical and political writings (books of essays); second, because it is a striking summation of Revueltas's convictions about the nature of the cinematic knowledge and even knowledge in general – of

³⁹ Notes by the editors of *ECC*, 167-168.

how it depends largely on an awe-inspired, imaginative openness to the world; and third, because it begins his discussion of the type of phenomenon montage is.

For it often surfaces throughout *El conocimiento cinematográfico* that, for Revueltas, it is through montage that cinema reanimates the Baroque concept of monstrosity as a means of teaching and learning. Primarily I refer to Jesuit philosopher Baltasar Gracián's exposition of monstrosity in his novel *El criticón*, from 1651. In Gracián, the presence of wonders (monstrosity among them) is part of the Baroque's pedagogical aesthetic – which, according to Miguel Grande Yáñez, is based on “the suspension of prodigies” and in how the contemplative admiration of such marvels “provoke ideological and instructional transmission.”⁴⁰ The novel follows two characters, Andrenio and Citrilo, through several stages of knowledge and wisdom in a world inhabited by portents and fantastical beasts. These wonders perplex the spectator because of how they combine that which does not seem to belong together. Andrenio tells Citrilo in one particular episode where they contemplate the cosmic cycles, that the sight of the stars' movement “kept him in suspense, for how could anyone not be dumbfounded by such a strange concert, composed of oppositions?”⁴¹ Fascination is what, for Yáñez, leads to awe and thus the witnessed marvel is “engraved in memory's bosom, making philosophical investigation possible.” In *El criticón*, Gracián, “makes us look through the glass of wonders” so that we are able to witness “the spectacle of marvels”⁴² like the Phoenix, the Basilisk (itself a montage of reptilian and avian body parts) and the Unicorn in Gracián, or Calderón de la Barca's Griffin, Góngora's Polyphemus, and other monstrous, collaged creatures of the Baroque repertoire. For Revueltas, too, the conjugation of opposing values creates Baroque wonders, so it is unsurprising

⁴⁰ Miguel Grande Yáñez, “Mundo natural y civil en el pensamiento barroco graciano” in *Gracián, Barroco y Modernidad*, eds. Miguel Grande Yáñez y Ricardo Pinilla (Madrid: Universidad Pontificia Comillas, 2004), 149.

⁴¹ Baltasar Gracián, *El criticón*, ed. Emilio Blanco (Madrid: Castro-Turner, 1993), 34.

⁴² Grande Yáñez, “Mundo natural...” 149.

that in renewing the Baroque marvel for the cinema, he turns to Eisenstein and his early theories of montage. As we have seen, Revueltas finds juxtaposition at the very heart of cinema, arguing that film itself is a dialectical synthesis of “immobility-mobility.” That is cinema’s inherent monstrosity, the wonder that will force us to investigate it because it fascinates us and lingers in our memory. We might also remember that Elizondo lists such creatures as a heart with eyes and an angel with an arrow for a tongue to introduce Buñuel’s Baroque *emblemata* – all creatures unleashed to teach moral lessons, to instruct.

That Revueltas’s montage is but a version of Eisenstein’s adds another Baroque dimension to Revueltas’s theory – specifically, a Neobaroque tension between the aesthetic of the colonial power and that of the colonized subjects. I propose we think of Revueltas’s reworking of Eisenstein in the terms Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos put forward in his essay “The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe Under the Sign of Devoration,” where he deploys the metaphor of cannibalism to describe the anti-colonial effects for which Latin American literature enlisted European Baroque culture.⁴³ De Campos thus defined a Neobaroque aesthetic in which “renegade colonial subjects appropriated, consumed, digested and so incorporated in the colonial body imposed cultural forms.”⁴⁴ I take Revueltas’s appropriation of Eisenstein to be, in part, a Neobaroque act of cannibalism precisely because Revueltas acknowledges his major influence directly and thus enacts what Irleamar Chiampi envisions as one of the Neobaroque’s principal goals. For Chiampi, the Neobaroque “aims at a utopia of the aesthetic, in which the privileged word is that of cultures constructed not through the conjunction of norms erected in the hegemonic centers, but through the multitemporal heterogeneity that launched them into

⁴³ Haroldo de Campos, “The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe Under the Sign of Devoration” in *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, eds. Louis Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, trans. Maria Tai Wolff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 319.

⁴⁴ Parkinson Zamora and Mónica Kaup, “Introduction” in *Baroque New Worlds*, 11.

history.”⁴⁵ Eisenstein’s theories of montage are right alongside Bazin’s theories of realism in the classical film theory canon, a set of works that have been constructed in the hegemony and which, despite their stated debt to their predecessors, rehearse an unmistakable rhetoric of original and originating thought, indebted to many currents of inquiry, but not to any within the history of film theory and criticism itself. Revueltas fulfills Chiampi’s insight because his theory of the cinema knows itself to be part of an existing investigation, a transcultural complex that both a filmmaking practice primarily imposed by the dominant industries, and their attendant corpus of theoretical literature, spurred.

Remarkably, and once again following Eisenstein, none of his examples in the first essay come from cinema itself. Revueltas exemplifies again and again how montage creates monstrous wonders by juxtaposing opposites, but in the first essay, at least, he does not speak of actual shots or sequences of films – a rhetorically sound strategy to show that the principle of juxtaposition that he believes is at the heart of cinema is the core of all artistic creation. It is a move that ties together several strands of Revueltas’s elaboration of montage throughout the book, and many of his other theories on the nature and significance of film, which in turn link Revueltas to the tradition of poetic inquiry. For it is through Revueltas’s processing of Eisenstein’s montage that he suggests what the viewer can do to be amazed by the monstrosity of cinema and, through that amazement, embrace the ghostly autonomous projection of the chroniclers (and beyond), and transform both her language and herself.

The above invocation of Rilke’s musings on Rodin’s sculptures is only one instance in which the assimilation of Eisenstein’s montage begins taking shape. Besides Rodin’s pieces, and not unlike Eisenstein and Bazin, Revueltas turns to painting, but given his own cultural

⁴⁵ Irleamar Chiampi, “Baroque at the Twilight of Modernity” in *Baroque New Worlds*, trans. William Childers, 525.

background, Revueltas chooses the school of Mexican muralism and some of its most celebrated exponents: *Cuauhtémoc contra el mito* by David Álfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco's *Alegoría de la mexicanidad*, *El circo contemporáneo* and *El sepulturero*. Choosing these muralists also makes sense when talking about Eisenstein, whose storied stay in Mexico and the embattled production of his unfinished film *¡Que Viva Mexico!* could have been decisive in Revueltas's film thought and, perhaps, in Mexican film culture in general⁴⁶ (we will recall Elizondo also references Eisenstein in his reflections on film). Revueltas, however, does not treat it that way. He acknowledges Eisenstein's Mexican sojourn almost offhandedly while venturing that montage-inspiring, contrasting compositions are present in landscapes and cities: "The city of Taxco, which Eisenstein must've seen when he was in Mexico... moves back and forth, sways slowly, and oscillates mysteriously in its alleyways, with its superimposed planes and its rows of houses."⁴⁷ (In another instance of national assimilation of film theory, just as Revueltas reassembles Eisenstein's theory with Mexican art, he injects montage within the Mexican geography itself). But when he brings up Siqueiros's painting, noting that "[a]mong Mexican painters, Siqueiros is the one that more consciously applies to his art the principles of cinematic montage,"⁴⁸ Revueltas seems unaware that the painter literally turned to cinema and Eisenstein's theories for assistance in his muralism. The two men even met in 1931, precisely, in Taxco, which Revueltas only guesses the Soviet filmmaker visited and where Siqueiros spent time as a political exile. Masha Salazkina establishes the directness and intimacy of the connection between Siqueiros and Eisenstein after that first meeting:

⁴⁶ Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost*, 7. constructs a narrative that explains the success of Eisenstein's theories for Hollywood cinema and, given the latter's global reach, their subsequent success for world film culture. In it, Ray argues that Eisenstein had supplied the model for a powerful, relatively user-friendly and systematic (and systematizable) practice of sign-making and storytelling in film, which was also immensely aided by path dependence.

⁴⁷ Revueltas, *ECC*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

They met again just days before Eisenstein left Mexico for good, at an exhibit organized by Anita Brenner, where Eisenstein was an inaugural speaker. Siqueiros's own encounter with Eisenstein's ideas, in particular in relation to vertical and horizontal planes of organization of the frame... proved to be extremely productive. In an essay entitled "*Los vehículos de la pintura dialéctico-subversiva*," which he worked on exactly at the time of his meeting Eisenstein in Taxco, Siqueiros extended Eisenstein's montage principles to mural painting. The essay – essentially a manifesto for Siqueiros's mural painting – was originally intended for publication in 1932 by Seymour Stern's journal *Experimental Cinema* (in which some of the first images from *¡Que Viva Mexico!* appeared in 1930 along with one of the librettos), but before that date *Experimental Cinema* ceased to exist, as a result of which the essay was never published. The draft of the article among Stern's papers begins with a dedication from Siqueiros: "with admiration to Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein."⁴⁹

So, if Revueltas did not know of those meetings and writings (the latter of which had not been published at the time), not to mention how instrumental Siqueiros was to the structure of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (which was not released until 1979 in a rough cut), his sense that Siqueiros imbued his murals with Eisenstein's cinematic montage proved remarkably perceptive. Yet Siqueiros's connection to cinema was even more profound. Sergio Delgado provides a rich account of Siqueiros's relationship to film, from his influences from that medium to his incorporation of photography into his muralist's toolbox. First, besides Siqueiros's connection to Eisenstein, he had a less documented interest in the Mecca of American cinema: "While most critics concur in noting the importance of Eisenstein for Siqueiros's engagement with film and film form, a few of them are also keen on stressing the significance of Siqueiros's proximity to Hollywood, the film capital of the world, during his stay in Los Angeles."⁵⁰ It was then that he would be moved to express in his writings how cinema was, in his estimation, the artistic peak of modernity. Convinced of film's power, he found the medium could assist him in mural painting, particularly given the latter's scale and its dependence on the mobility of the viewer's gaze to take a mural in. In order to document the many vantage points from which spectators would look at his

⁴⁹ Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 51-52.

⁵⁰ Sergio Delgado, "Mass Media, Advertising, and Reconfigurations of Sense Perception in the Latin American Avant-Garde" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2010), 69.

murals, Siqueiros brought cameras to the sites on whose walls he would paint, like he did for the Argentina-located *Ejercicio plástico* (1934) in Delgado's telling:

Preparatory work for *Ejercicio plástico* did include photographing human models posing on glass platforms, viewed from below, as well as projections of hand-drawn sketches and photographs onto the walls where the mural was to be painted with the intent of exploring how a small, flat image that could be perceived in its entirety in a glance, unfolded into dovetailing planes when blown up to cover the large physical proportions of a wall. But the principal technical difficulty tackled by Siqueiros in completing *Ejercicio plástico* with photographic equipment was to account for the multiple points of view from which the mural could be regarded by coordinating a manifold of perspectives within a unified pictorial surface. This called for a formal structure that unfolds not from a single, unified point of view but rather from a multiplicity of dovetailing perspectives, the succession of which is determined by the path taken by the spectator as she surveys the mural painting.⁵¹

To speak of the murals he crafted with the above method, which were an “assemblage of a montage-like sequence of painterly planes that are brought together by the movement of the spectator,” he used the term “*plástica filmica*,” or “filmic plastic arts.”⁵² His murals were not only cinematic by design, but also *cinogenic* – film was part of their very constitution.

There were many reasons for the murals to serve Revueltas's exposition of his film theories. Like one of those roving spectators, Revueltas stalks through these monumental art works, zeroing into the eruptions of meaning brought about within the arrangement of their elements. In the middle of his scanning of the murals, it becomes apparent that what Orozco, Siqueiros and Rodin have in common is that their chosen arts, painting and sculpture, display “spatial concreteness in [their] transmission of the represented world but [allow] temporal indefiniteness.”⁵³ Rather than collecting demonstrations of montage from cinema, Revueltas has foregrounded phenomena of consistent integrity that can be appreciated through an unbroken

⁵¹ Ibid., 62-63.

⁵² Ibid., 75.

⁵³ Boris Andreevich Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 76.

gaze rather than through the splicing together of temporally discontinuous sections – a devoration, if you will, of the process of *editing* so crucial to filmmaking. Of course, Eisenstein never stopped cultivating and evolving his theories of montage throughout his career. From his earliest comparisons of filmmaking with the drawing of Chinese ideograms and Japanese characters, to his later essays like “Montage in 1938,” and “Vertical Montage,” Eisenstein remarks that editing alone was, in fact, *not* the only means of producing meaningful collisions of sound and image, but that montage operations happened within shots, between shots, between scenes, between sequences and between sound and image. However, it is likely viewers will remember his classics like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1928), and many of those of his contemporaries, like Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), not to mention Lev Kuleshov’s fabled experiments with impossible geographies and emotional perception, as masterclasses in film editing, with their exhilarating and often shocking progressions from one striking image to the next. Readers might also remember the title of a 1926 essay Eisenstein wrote in response to an article of another early film theorist, Hungarian writer Béla Balázs, where the latter spoke of the cameraman as the true artist in the creation of cinema. Eisenstein’s retort claims at the very outset that “Béla Forgets the Scissors,” alluding to the task of the film editor, the cutter of the celluloid strip, as responsible for a film’s artistry. Still, whether we are willing to lock Eisenstein’s montage in a single technical question (an inaccurate reduction that would not do it justice), we must concede that it is a chameleon-like creature, endlessly surprising in its complexity. *Revueltas*’s, on the other hand, starts revealing a vision of montage more akin to an accumulation of motifs within a single, unedited look. The latter is more interested in juxtapositions that maintain spatial and temporal wholeness than the expressive possibilities of the cinematic cut.

The lack of cinematic fragmentation is a rather rare decision in cinema, be it in the fiction film or documentary. Experiments with feature-length shots exist, from Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) to more recent films like Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), the Uruguayan horror production *La casa muda* (2010) and its American remake, *Silent House* (2011), and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014).⁵⁴ But the very rarity of the choice, and its impossibility in Revueltas's time (also Hitchcock's time: *Rope* merely conceals most of its cuts, which the length of a roll of film for a camera in the late forties made necessary) says something else about Revueltas's tacit longing for the dissolution of editing: its status as an ideal. Revueltas himself, as we have seen in passages, knew well the technical difficulties of filmmaking and how shooting schedules and the contingencies with which they dealt made editing, an activity that can hide as much as it exposes, unavoidable: in cinema on celluloid, "the physical conditions of production force" the "splicing of two strips of film."⁵⁵ And Revueltas insists on forgetting, to an extent, the medium of film in order to focus on what he thinks it really is. Quoting Soviet filmmaker Semyon Timoshenko, the Mexican author stipulates that "the methods of 'combining the successive order of scenes' and 'varying the camera's field of vision' within the same frame can be as varied as one wants, but they do not *determine* film."⁵⁶ Yet that he regarded editing as a necessity and not part of his ontology of cinema allows his theory to harmonize with the autonomous projection of the early critics (the ghost's presence is constant and continuous). Also, the virtual impossibility of a cinema without editing (indeed, a veritable monstrosity) is partly what drove Revueltas to realize it in literary,

⁵⁴ Without turning outright to one-shot films, several prominent Mexican filmmakers have made of the long take the basis of their storytelling. Arturo Ripstein has been working on this mode since the sixties, with films like *El castillo de la pureza* (1972) and *El lugar sin límites* (1977). More recently, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001), *Children of Men* (2006) and *Gravity* (2013) all contained elaborate, single-shot set pieces, as does Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), which continues that filmmaker's experiments with long take style and his collaboration with Cuarón's regular cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki.

⁵⁵ Revueltas (with a quote from Eisenstein), *ECC*, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

rather than cinematic, form, with the publication of *El apando*. The next section inspects Revueltas's philosophy of the long take, a monster perhaps related to the Basilisk, a part-reptile, part-bird beast that is nevertheless a whole being, a living, breathing montage without visible excisions. The long, unedited take might be the chimera lurking beneath Revueltas's theory of film.

4.1.5 Seeing Monstrosity to Let the Specter In: the Long Take, the Ecstatic Gaze, and *El apando*

Two other moments in *El conocimiento cinematográfico* support a reading of Revueltas's fantasy of film as one of elimination of the cut:

One, Revueltas's aforementioned categorization of film viewers in two groups: "*público*" and "*espectador*." We will remember that he identifies the latter as "an entity that has chosen on its own to be conditioned..., which attends the spectacle with a certain predetermined submission, one that does not exclude critical thinking because it is an intelligent submission that knows it will be reciprocated..."⁵⁷ Revueltas complicates this distinction by subsequently calling the camera "cinema's first spectator and only witness."⁵⁸ Understanding the camera as both the intelligently and critically submissive first viewer and the only entity to be present at the cinematic act (that is, the profilmic event, with all its false starts, repetitions, accidents and everything else editing compresses, corrects, intensifies and deletes) becomes significant because if we think of the camera's own gaze, both viewer and creator of cinema, as the all-inclusive, unstoppable (save for human intervention or mechanical failure) look that precedes editing. Revueltas's camera does not represent a mechanical guarantee of realistic imitation, but an ideal

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

spectator, one that is there at the service of the events before it, ready and able to take everything in – even the mistakes, preparations, and all the events commonly left out of the final film. We assist, then, to an inversion of Mulhall’s critique of cinema: it is not that film technology eliminates the human, but rather, that the technology performs the very human ability of witnessing and is completely open to the reception of images to a perfection desirable, and conceivably achievable, for all humans – that is, humans are hypothetically capable of letting the (unedited, continuous) images inhabit them once the latter’s monstrosity opens them. The temporal and spatial imaginative leaps and discontinuities that might be associated with editing could also be a process that does not need the film itself to be fragmented and reconstituted. Rather, the body of the spectator is, in his theory, the true site of becoming of the image – it is there where it is turned from a fixed sequence into a plastic object that can be reshaped, torn apart, and reassembled once again.

Two, in “*Lineamientos para un cine de vanguardia*” (“Outlines for an Avant-Garde Cinema”) the 1965 documentary *Todos somos hermanos* (1965), by director Óscar Menéndez, activates the following reflection in Revueltas, which I quote in its entirety for its singular beauty:

No crime or virtue shall ever be anything less than fully exposed, naked and guilty. Throughout his history, in the incessant flow of Heraclitus’s river, man’s life is *continuously* witnessed, just as he is forever ready to witness for himself every one of its human expressions and outcomes. Here [in cinema] lies his conscience toward the past or toward the future; the conscience that will be his moving, *constant* and *eternal* testimony until its own definitive end.

[*Ningún crimen ni virtud alguna dejarán algún día de estar al descubierto, desnudos y culpables. A lo largo de su historia, en el incesante fluir del río de Heráclito, el hombre es un ser testimoniado de continuo y en trance de testimoniarse en todas las direcciones humanas posibles. He aquí su conciencia hacia lo pretérito o hacia el porvenir; la conciencia como su testimonio móvil y constante, eterno hasta su propio acabamiento final.*]⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Revueltas, *ECC*, 140 (my emphasis).

Menéndez's doggedness in presenting the minutiae of daily life, of constructing his film with audiovisual material that traditional demands for attractions (the wishes of an "unconditioned audience") would render unworthy of being committed to film, brings Revueltas to coin the term "cinema-conscience" (*cine-conciencia*) to accompany Vertov's *kino-glasi*, (cine-eye) and to bestow upon it the qualities of the camera-as-witness: the power to omit nothing, to keep nothing out of sight, and to do so eternally and constantly. Revueltas's project for an ideal cinema is a plea for a life that benefits from the existence of an eye (cinema) destined to stay open, to become a "tenacious... and incorruptible witness."⁶⁰

Once again, I have not called this eye "mechanical" or "technological" because, in light of Revueltas's aims with his novella *El apando*, that eye is also very much organic. First published in 1969, I believe his writings are a pedagogy of the human eye, a training of the deeply human capacity to bear witness, to observe every manifestation of human activity. The possibility of human perception matching some of cinema's capacities justifies a return to Siqueiros, who would have agreed with observations about the cinematic logic of modern perception. But Siqueiros did not think the eye had to be educated to be like cinema, but rather, that it was an education that had become second nature for modern subjects. According to Delgado,

in a text written to describe what *Ejercicio plástico* is, Siqueiros writes: "We made the camera into a visual machine corresponding to the active optic reality of the normal spectator" This identification between the camera's mechanical visual register of the world and "the active optic reality of the normal spectator" is telling. It hints at an already assimilated perceptual mode, a camera or photo mode, a mode that Siqueiros attributes to the "dynamic nature of the spectator" as well as to the artist, underlining the latter's need to appropriate the means (i.e. the camera) to engage with the "optical reality" of the times.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Delgado, *Mass Media, Advertising, and Reconfigurations...* 64.

Delgado further explains the theoretical importance of Siqueiros's claims by proposing how the muralist suggested a relationship between media technology and the human similar to the one Revueltas advances in "*Lineamientos para un cine de vanguardia*," in which there is something the human body could learn from cinema about how to make contact with the world, not because of how it might reproduce that world but, rather, how it might expand it, transform it, and interact with it in multiple configurations:

It is not as if the camera transformed the spectator's visual engagement with the world, his optical reality. Rather, it corresponds to it, suggesting, again, a previously existing connection that exists in virtue of a shared historical circumstance that saw the rise of photography concurrently with the emergence of a new mode of perception. In fashioning a notion of dynamic realism based on the recognition of a correspondence between the visual register furnished by photography and the "optical reality" of modern times, Siqueiros forwards a highly nuanced notion of the relationship between realism and reality, one that goes far beyond the positivist servitude of realism to reality (the one as a faithful depiction of the other) towards a more dynamic frame of thought that posits photography in particular and media not as mere instruments but as active elements (prosthetic organs) in the dynamics of perception.⁶²

It was through his cinegenic murals that Siqueiros realized the "need to appropriate the means... to engage with the 'optical reality' of the times." For his part, Revueltas goes beyond the "shared historical circumstances that saw the rise of photography" and cinema, finding in the "new mode of perception" a valuable awareness for facing and reacting to social and political phenomena. Siqueiros's filmic plastic arts, a praxis that catered to and encouraged the new, mechanized, prosthetic mode of perception, becomes Revueltas's uninterrupted gaze, a superimposition in free indirect style of numerous, diverse viewpoints. *El apando* is, then, like a literary cinegenic mural, which tells the story of how three inmates (Albino, Polonio and *El carajo*) find themselves lighting the fuse on a prison riot after it is discovered the women in their lives are trying to smuggle drugs into their cell. *Apando* means "isolation cell," which is where the three men find themselves and where they agree to plot how to obtain the women's contraband

⁶² Ibid., 67.

substances. Spanning no longer than a couple of days (with scenes where the characters reminisce about their lives before their incarceration), *El apando* is structured as a single, unbroken, sixty page-long paragraph, written in an indirect free style that combines the voices and perspectives of all its main characters (six in total) in its solid block of text. The book represented the culmination of its author's formal experimentation and, I would add, the purest expression of his ideas about the nature of cinema. Notice the use of the term "superimposition" in this excerpt, which describes the experience of Meche, a woman visiting her lover in prison, as she is invasively searched before entering the premises:

Meche could not articulate... what was happening to her... or the new and secret language of unique, forbidding peculiarities, with which things expressed themselves, but... it wasn't the things in general or as a group that eluded her, but rather how each one of them uttered its own words... and the subterranean network of communications and meanings that linked them in the margins of time and space... An archeology of passions, feelings and sin – where the abstract weapons, tools and organs of desire, the tendency of each imperfect fact to search for its consanguinity and its realization, no matter how incestuous it seemed, in its own twin – that approximate their object through a long, insistent and tireless adventure of superimpositions... of unsettled and pressing signs that feverishly await an instant in which they can meet that other part of themselves and, through their touch, be finally deciphered.⁶³

I will return to the endlessness of *El apando*'s typographic structure that the above passage represents, but I must pause to point out how characteristic the latter is of many of my study's concerns – there is the intuition of another, unknown world and the hope of reaching it (with a visionary sense); there's the uncertainty about where that other world might be, so that the inside and the outside of the body become difficult to distinguish; there's the incompleteness and openness of not just the body, but of systems of signification. Here signs desperately seek closure, a pursuit that, in poetic investigation, would be met not with resolution but expansion. Incest is brought up again here in a fashion that further clarifies Revueltas's sense of artistic

⁶³ José Revueltas, *El apando* (Mexico City: Era, 1978), 30.

monstrosity. The contact with the enigmatic dimension that requires an imaginative leap is a search for “consanguinity” – that is, the creation of the new requires procreation with oneself. Committing incest to achieve consanguinity is thus another form of contact with the immanent outside. In a text without sections or ellipses, all its ideas are pushed close together, making their quest for the twin that will complete them more immediate. Revueltas has placed his words in the line of fire of incestuous temptation to see what they invent from their inbreeding.

For Francisco Ramírez Santacruz, the absence of paragraph breaks induces “an ecstatic gaze,” which attempts to “eliminate, by way of a panoptic look, all the barriers, walls, cages and bars of the prison,”⁶⁴ a seeing through superimpositions, as it were. In Ramírez Santacruz’s account, *El apando*’s fully realized composition of a visual ecstasy succeeds in becoming the life-saving instrument it was meant provide, a literary equivalent “of keeping one’s eyes open to reality in order to survive.”⁶⁵ Faced with the horror of prison brutality, Revueltas could only react by staring right back, avoiding the trauma of the incomplete and imagined and replacing it with lucidity and awareness, and producing a text that would turn the horror of injustice into artistic beauty – an ekphrastic project that recalls the approach of the critics of the silent period to a cinema they invited to make a home within them. Is it possible to speculate that the infinitesimal blindness of a film cut is yet another barrier that the ecstatic gaze tries to evaporate? That abandoning editing is cinema’s way into visual ecstasy? It is a question the film adaptation of *El apando*, released just a few months after Revueltas’s death of lung cancer in 1976, instructively elides. A heavily, if evocatively, edited movie, the film version of *El apando* only makes a few gestures toward capturing Revueltas’s ecstatic gaze, despite the many horrifying images from the book it stages and executes. The one that Mexican film critics like Emilio

⁶⁴ Francisco Ramírez Santacruz, *El apando de José Revueltas: una poética de la libertad* (Tlaxcala: Ediciones Páginas, 2006), 78.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

García Riera (from *Nuevo Cine*) came to champion as the most successful was an idea from director Felipe Cazals that did not appear in the screenplay, credited to José Agustín and Revueltas himself. In a scene in which Albino (Salvador Sánchez) remembers making love to his girlfriend Meche (María Rojo) in a pool – a memory ignited by his friend Polonio's (Manuel Ojeda) playful display, through the contraction and expansion of his stomach, of a tattoo depicting a couple engaged in a tantric sexual position – Cazals intercuts the past lovemaking with the tattoo's present undulations.

So far, the parallel editing replaces visual continuity for the joining together of two time frames and spaces through the cut, suggesting a simultaneity of memory (the tryst at the pool) and action (the tattoo's choreography). But suddenly, we realize the water in the pool is red – supposedly blood red. The color surrounds the lovers, and the memory of their congress, with the violence that now, in prison, pervades not only their environment, but also their thoughts. Cazals's solution to show how the prison's constant destruction of the body invades the characters' most pleasant recollections (the way inside and outside, past and present are conflated, how they literally bleed into one another) impressed Riera, who saw the move as another step forward in the depuration of the director's style.⁶⁶ But Cazals's gambit strikes me as problematic because the metaphor his red water weaves heavy-handedly confirms a connection the parallel editing alone establishes through montage... assuming the image works as intended. Clever though it may seem, the dying of the water depends on the viewer being able to identify the color as the crimson of blood rather than, say, the brown of a neglected swimming pool. The dye is just not unmistakably bloody, or specific enough to secure an association with hemorrhaging bodies. Superimposing the love scene over the sight of the room for visitors, where Polonio's tattoo dances for everyone's enjoyment, might have been a more elegant

⁶⁶ Emilio García Riera, "El apando" in *Historia Documental del Cine Mexicano. Vol. 8*, 134.

representation of how violence seeps into the minds of those who suffer it every day. There's also the possibility of blocking the remembrance right within the prison walls. One could imagine a film version of *El apando*, made entirely of superimpositions and splices to simulate a single camera shot, being more faithful to Revueltas's ecstatic gaze than Cazals's undeniably potent film.

Such an adaptation might at least look more like the autonomous projection I have been following through a tradition of poetic investigation, or be even more of an anomaly, a monster among moving images that proceed in customary, more recognizable ways. And so it would better match not only Revueltas's novella, but also his vision of what cinema should be. Only a cinema that effaces its technological basis (through its foregoing of cuts, of editing, the reminders of the apparatus) and constructs an image that does not stutter (like a ghost perfectly attuned to the world, free of glitches and easily observable) can achieve the possession of the viewer by cinema that encourages poetic invention... if that viewer partakes of the image as an ecstatic spectator, ready to never blink.

4.1.6 Film Theory and Mexican Identity

Witnessing and the figure of the witness have been central to the discourse of Latin American cultural studies, and Revueltas's writing in *El apando* brims with testimonial fervor, its subject the author's political imprisonment in Lecumberri. But how does its witnessing ensure survival, as Santacruz claims? Or rather, what is the result of witnessing? In the context of my study, witnessing in Revueltas becomes not only a creative act, but a transformative one, and those attributes raise the question of what *El apando* and its film-theoretical content have to say about *testimonio*. The latter concept is

an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history.⁶⁷

A kind of writing that advocates for acknowledgement and justice for those marginalized by unequal geopolitical power dynamics, readings of *testimonios* often consider them a form of resistance. Their effectiveness on the latter objective has come into question in critiques that wonder if the truth-content of *testimonios*, which base their very existence and power from their origins in memory and subjectivity, is not somehow compromised. Beatriz Sarlo, for instance, rejects the “privileging of subjective discourses over those where subjectivity is absent or hidden,” because although “memory can function as a moral challenge to history and its sources,” it “cannot support [its] claims to be less problematic than what is constructed by other discourses.”⁶⁸ For Sarlo, there is something to be said for methodological rigor in the writing of history that looks for truth that exists “outside experience” and thus can be reliably acted upon. Contesting that very notion, John Beverley thinks *testimonio* is a strong opposition to the domination of a truth that can become a play for hegemony – like that of academic discourse – because it is precisely “a regime of truth that operates ‘off-campus.’” *Testimonio* aims to problematize the hope for a truth outside of discourse by “relativizing the authority of academic knowledge” so that we can “recognize what academic knowledge is in fact: not the truth but a form of truth among many others.”⁶⁹ The debate over *testimonio* bears on the solidity of the argument that *El apando*’s pedagogy of the senses does indeed liberate, and what that liberation

⁶⁷ George Yúdice. “*Testimonio* and Postmodernism” in *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (Summer, 1991): 17.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Charles Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity: Politics and Poetics in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 87.

⁶⁹ John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7.

means – if it reaches for a truth beyond subjectivity, or if it imposes a subjectivity as legitimate knowledge.

It might not be necessary to choose between those two options. Approaching the quandary between Sarlo and Beverley, Charles Hatfield's recent work argues that their disagreement is only apparent. Within Sarlo's defense of what she calls "good academic history"⁷⁰ is an acknowledgement that its knowledge is not incontrovertible or unproblematic – she only asks that the knowledge of memory and subjectivity recognize that it too can be problematic. The conflict is hence between two discourses that share an urge to grapple with the impossibility of absolutism and perfection through different strategies: one attempts to enhance agreement through thoroughness, precision and (to a lesser or greater extent, but inevitably) institutional support, while the other rejects supremacy outright and, in so doing, declares its ability to establish relationships of reciprocity within what Laclau and Mouffe call a "plurality of subjects."⁷¹ Both cases, Hatfield argues, are in fact two different forms of identity politics. In her admission that her own truth is discursive, Sarlo proposes the weaving of information through a network of systems of knowledge production, resting its claims more on highly organized, conventional justification than *testimonio* does without entirely overcoming subjectivity. In the end, they are both constructions that differ in their means to achieve persuasiveness. Neither truly or completely embraces a category that Latin American Studies have historically (and, it must be said, often justifiably) opposed: the universal, in that they cannot put forth narratives impervious to variations in perspective.⁷²

Hatfield sets out to critique both forms of identity politics, and Latin Americanist discourses in general, for their tendency to practically default to an anti-universalist rhetoric, and

⁷⁰ Quoted in Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity*, 87.

⁷¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1995), 181.

⁷² Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity*, 89.

how doing so has in fact damaged their cause for a more inclusive democracy, for it is the intuition and desire for universalism that becomes the condition of possibility of difference and dialogue: “the universal is not a ‘task’ that is achieved when everyone agrees; instead, it is what allows us to disagree in the here and now.”⁷³ Following Laclau, Hatfield makes a case for universalism “as a worthy aspiration that can never be achieved” because “it is incommensurable with any particularity yet cannot exist apart from the particular.” It is, in other words, “an impossible task that makes democratic interaction achievable.”⁷⁴ Its impossibility makes a bittersweet pairing with its worthiness when one thinks, for example, of hopefully universal goals like ending discrimination. Also, Hatfield retrieves the realization that neoliberalism has successfully incorporated diversity in its logic without in fact improving class conditions and economic inequalities for groups whose differences have nevertheless entered the mainstream’s awareness. Universalism has in that sense a certain, real weight that *testimonio* or other alternatives to legitimizing master narratives have not been able to dismantle.⁷⁵ With this in mind, the conversation around witnessing in *El apando* and *El conocimiento cinematográfico* can be reframed to one about Revueltas’s position toward universalism.

From the above excerpts of *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, one can say Revueltas is certainly on the side of universalism. Not only does he think cinema is a viable universal language, but also, his composition of a film theory carries signs of a positivist attitude. Superlatives abound, as do words like “essence” and “fundamental.” What Revueltas does with Eisenstein’s writings becomes, through a positivist glass, not only a devoration, but also a rational reconstruction of the Soviet filmmaker’s theories – as much as he reconstitutes them, assimilates them, and transforms them, Revueltas ultimately states his belief in their accuracy

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴ Ernesto Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity” in *October* 61 (1992): 90.

⁷⁵ Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity*, 6.

and truth. In Gregg Davia's words, a rational reconstruction is "a rational 'again'-construction" that "is interested in making an object 'more equal to itself,' e.g., by extracting essential elements, reformulating and restructuring them" in order to "improve precision and consistency of the object of reconstruction."⁷⁶ Revueltas adapts Eisenstein for Mexican culture and restates his claims in his own terms, finding confirmation in his alignment with montage theory. *El conocimiento cinematográfico* often trundles along like a series of tests through which Revueltas puts Eisenstein's montage so that he can show its correctness. Arriving officially into the academy, Mexican film thought had its first true moment of formalized rigor in Revueltas's film-theoretical work.

This is a good time to remember that positivism and poetic inquiry can stand not in opposition, but in cooperation. As it should become clear in this chapter, Revueltas provides a positivist backbone to the need for theories to proliferate (through poetic investigation, for example). So Revueltas, again, is not out of place among these writers. But a look at his work beyond *El conocimiento cinematográfico* uncovers his turn to poetics for the treatment of the film phenomenon and, thus, an adoption of subjectivity and particularity – in other words, of the (proposed) anti-universalism of *testimonio*. *El apando* has a clear testimonial intent, portraying with great fictional intensity and an air of experiential authenticity the conditions of his unjust incarceration. It is not, however, autobiographical or limited to a single point of view. More crucially, I find the novella places emphasis on the imaginative step of witnessing. *El apando*'s testimonial work is both a performance of vision and a production of something beyond witnessing, an utterance that conveys not the past but a fictional time. Revueltas is not only enacting a gaze in his prose – he is also making something out of it. Just as the implied reader's

⁷⁶ Gregg Davia, "Thoughts on a Possible Rational Reconstruction of the Method of 'Rational Re- construction'" in *The Paeideia Project Online*, August 1998, <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Scie/ScieDavi.htm> (accessed on March 23rd, 2015).

eyes (and her imagined senses) are forced to remain open and take in the stimuli of the novella's prison setting, Revueltas's own eyes, the ones that looked upon fellow prisoners and their lives, secreted something out into the world. In the process, he is not looking for the reader to share his ordeal, or at least not only that. Even if the reader can conceivably, vicariously relive, through reading, the writer's experience of, shall we say, external events, or even their affective consequence (which for Sarlo would lead to "suffering through nightmares" rather than "taking control of them"),⁷⁷ the claim for universality is the process by which the writer decides and allows those events to change him. The intelligent passivity of Revueltas's spectator (who submits to cinema's wholeness) or the spectator's will and ability to metamorphose, emerges as a (desirably) universal quality. The pedagogy of the senses that is Revueltas's film theory and its incarnation in *El apando* train the readers' openness to transformation. Revueltas alludes to that openness in the characters' accounts of their travails (the guard's search of Meche); in the continuous shifting of voices that force the reader to constantly switch between reading positions; and, most visibly, in the text's fullness, its total occupation of every page.

How is *El apando*'s text "full"? And how does that fullness assist in a pedagogy of transformation? Let me turn to Girish Shambu's work on cinephilia for an illustration. The desired effect of such pedagogy is the creation of a certain generous disposition, which Shambu believes is ideal for fruitful, generous discourse in cinephile conversations (and for film-viewing in general, for Revueltas). Thinking about how to induce such disposition, Shambu quotes an interview of Gilles Deleuze by *Cahiers du cinéma* critics about Jean-Luc Godard's television series *Six Times Two* (1976). Deleuze speaks about the filmmaker's talent to carry out compelling, revealing interviews, and Shambu highlights the moment when Deleuze appears to name Godard's secret weapon: a unique stutter. "It is as though, in a way, he's always

⁷⁷ Quoted in Hatfield, *The Limits of Identity*, 88.

stammering. Not stammering in words, but in language itself. You can normally only be a foreigner in another language, but here it's a case of being a foreigner in one's own language. Proust said that fine books had to be written in a sort of foreign language. It's the same with Godard... It's this creative stammering... which makes Godard a force."⁷⁸ Shambu wishes to stress "Godard's hesitant, tentative demeanor"⁷⁹ and how it invites conversation. Godard inspires his interviewees to fill in the blanks of his fluid stutter, opening himself to dialogue. That tentativeness is the disposition that makes listening a path to change. It would seem absurd to speak of creative stammering in a book like *El apando*, whose diagnosis might be closer to logorrhea, in its effluence of words, than to the metaphorical *paralalia literalis* that Deleuze so admires in Godard. But there is another element to what makes Godard such a great interviewer, according to Deleuze. From earlier in that interview, he says:

As someone who works a great deal, [Godard] must be a very solitary figure. But it's not just any solitude, it's an extraordinarily animated solitude. Full, not of dreams, fantasies, and projects, but of acts, things, people even. A multiple, creative solitude. From the depth of this solitude Godard constitutes a force in his own right but also gets others to work as a team. He can deal as an equal with anyone, with official powers or organizations, as well as a cleaning lady, a worker, mad people... [I]ts because of this solitude gives him a great capacity, is so full.⁸⁰

A full solitude: few descriptors fit Revueltas's witness/spectator and the morphology of *El apando* so well. Deleuze's observation pivots on the deeply paradoxical ability to build a spacious fullness. I take the "solitude" to mean a kind of absence, but in this case, the absence is both deep and replete, like *El apando*'s pages. It is a fullness that allows its bearer to become a threshold, to put the solitary entity on the verge of becoming. Let us remember that the French word for "full", *plein*, also means "in the middle of," as if there is an ever-present readiness for a

⁷⁸ Quoted in Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (Montreal: Caboose, 2014), 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Gilles Deleuze. *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 37.

completion that never happens but that nevertheless urges an ending to that solitude through contact, communication, and community. The ecstatic gaze in *El apando* holds a set of lonely, separate selves that never quite meet in its diegesis, but become continuous with one another in the prose. It is therefore both a full, solid totality and an ever-changing plasticity. What fills it is *poiesis*, something that has presence but can also make room within it for more knowledge. And it is with such plastic solidity that the novella achieves a cinematic (in Revueltas's conception) effect: taking the form of an inviting, monstrous entity with a full presence that can both enter the reader/viewer and change her, and be able to reciprocate that transaction. For even when cinema should, in the works of writers of poetic inquiry, be a complete, imposing specter, or an amazing creature that inspires the viewer's learning and invention, it must also make room for the viewer, as if it were offering a handshake. In the hope for mutual change, the viewer can write back to cinema with the inspiration the latter has provided. That is how, I believe, Revueltas's theories facilitate poetic investigation, spurring a temperament of willingness to find wonders so that one can express oneself passionately, beautifully, personally and amazedly about them.

4.1.7 Lessons of Incest: Revueltas and His Students

Even if I am trying to approximate an impression of the influence of *El conocimiento cinematográfico* and Revueltas's teachings on cinema, I find the exercise more valuable for how it can articulate speculative links between writers and filmmakers, and thus envision an imaginary and imaginative community, than for its precision in the pathways of film study in Mexico. I do not intend to draw a causal line between the dots of Revueltas's work and that of those who might have been his students. Still, Revueltas's presence in a turning point in the history of CUEC and its host institution incites questions of where his lessons went. First, there

is a perceptible consistency between his writings and his efforts to establish the self-management (and thus the intellectual freedom) of the public National University. One of his driving concepts, which he constructed for the Student Movement, was “*democracia cognoscitiva*,” (cognitive democracy), or the “constant recreation of a text from a diversity of voices.”⁸¹ The latter’s kinship to his film theories and their appearances in *El apando* should be palpable. In one of his early lectures dedicated to the Student Movement and its goal of self-management for the National University, Revueltas first elaborated what cognitive democracy meant:

Self-management precisely implies the maximum freedom of consciousness, its multiple exercise and the widest and unrestricted concurrence of doctrines, ideologies, politics and theories, situated in a radical anti-dogmatic position. That is, self-management starts from the principle of a *cognitive democracy* in which knowledge constitutes a debate, an impugnation, a *revision* (a reworking) of its processes: its constant recreation.⁸²

With his intellectual leadership through propositions like the one above, and his role in CUEC’s program, the 1968 moment came to crystallize Revueltas’s haunting of Mexican film thought, for the movement was indelibly captured in a work produced by film students from CUEC. In Casanova’s words, CUEC did not acquire the prestige that would justify its existence and secure its longevity until students produced the controversial documentary *El grito* (*The Cry*, 1968), a harrowing testimony of the Student Movement that was immediately banned by Díaz Ordaz’s administration.⁸³ Revueltas was indeed one of its leaders, so even though the legacy of *El grito* might not have direct links to Revueltas’s theories on cinema, his ideological teachings were in the bloodstream of the anger that produced the film. In fact, director Leobardo López Aretche, the filmmaker behind *El grito*, turned Revueltas’s political concepts into a visual *sucederse* (a word that means both “happening” and “progression”), to use the latter’s term.

⁸¹ Ramírez Santacruz, *El apando de José Revueltas*, 87.

⁸² José Revueltas, *México ‘68: Juventud y Revolución* (Mexico City: Era, 1989), 155 (his emphasis).

⁸³ González Casanova, “El CUEC: un ‘sueño’ imposible,” 34.

In *El grito*, the first sound we hear is a large group chanting a song that references, in style and structure, the *corridos* of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The following quote, from R. Rolland, emerges on the black screen: “to the free men of all nations who fight, suffer, and will prevail,” as the chanting builds to the climactic final verse, “and we will achieve freedom.” The opening act, in which the camera glides over protesting students gathering outside the university gates, is accompanied by a voice-over that translates some of Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci’s observations of the movement, which begins “Look at them: They are Mexicans, you see.” The voiceover narration, while dominant during the first section of the film, is joined in the soundtrack by the murmurs of the student crowd, a mostly incomprehensible wave of sound that nevertheless seems to carry Fallaci’s observations on its crest, even above the sounds of sirens and the militaristic thumping of marching – the reminder of the repressive force. Voice-over and disembodied utterances, once again, maintain the openness not only of the text, but the enigmatic dimension of the senses for the viewer who cannot match sound and image. Even though each chapter of the documentary strictly follows the events through a calendar, from July meetings through September marches to Tlatelolco in October, its flow is expansive rather than focused. The result is a documentary that is more tapestry than forward-moving machine, a text that, in each of its movements, reconstructs itself. It produces “knowledge as it controverts and rearranges itself,”⁸⁴ the vision Revueltas had for cognitive democracy as the organizing principle of university programs in which knowledge was inclusive of dissonance rather than exclusive of a proliferation of theories. The film embodies Revueltas’s own version of an interdisciplinary, revolutionary and, finally *Baroque* (as opposed to classical in its positivism, its love for continuity) approach to learning. Poetic investigation – the use of film as inspiration for inventing ecstatic language – as a legitimate form of knowledge production on the cinema would

⁸⁴ Ramírez Santacruz, *El apando de José Revueltas*, 88.

have been welcomed and nurtured in such an environment. Revueltas's film-theoretical work might not have explicit ties to the writings, like veins visible under the skin, but his political essays did circulate within the work of CUEC filmmakers, and might have shaped CUEC curricula for decades to come. And while *El conocimiento cinematográfico* does work toward a systematic approach to teaching film studies, his belief in the persistent reconstruction of theories would have clashed with attempts at sustained, regular instrumentalization. Is it not likely that, had he continued teaching at CUEC, Revueltas's political ideas would have called for a Cinema Studies that moved away from a Kuhnian paradigmatic model of knowledge and toward one that wished to maintain its revolutionary moments? Such conflation, a cognitive montage, as it were, would have set the stage for the critics to come and would have bound them to the poetic writing tradition that already preceded it. Through López Aretche, who gave the student movement its very earliest cinematic face, some of Revueltas's vision for CUEC and a pedagogy of film was secured. *El grito* even contains a segment that inevitably brings to mind Revueltas's invocation of Rilke's words about Rodin's sculptures. In a montage of still images of scenes at the protests, where bodies collide with police weaponry and form new entities, López Aretche generates a similar image to that in Revueltas's reference to Rilke, except it is not only hands, thighs and backs that come together, but also anti-mutiny shields and truncheons. Rilke's listing of impossible conjunctions of hands and limbs feels like the progression of stills that, in their apparent immobility, capture the very instant of creation of visual concepts. Revueltas' presence, and that of his book on film, is felt.

There is, however, a profound feeling of loss and a tragic, inescapable longing for what could have been for CUEC, its students, and a philosophy of film education. López Aretche was probably the Center's most famous student, to the point that his name became synonymous with

CUEC.⁸⁵ His mysterious suicide at age twenty-eight forever froze his persona in those early career stages. The striking student shorts he left behind are only clues to the projects that might have followed – films like *Panteón* (1965), a tour of a graveyard composed of a few long, unbroken takes made with a skull mounted on the camera lens to shoot through the eye sockets. A brief meditation on death that tries to approach it by taking its point of view, it is humorous and melancholy, something that cannot be said about the harrowing *El grito*, made three years later. They also represent two different conceptions of montage. Putting aside a temptation of chalking up *Panteón*'s experiment to collegiate ambition, the kind that sees student filmmakers reach beyond their means, there is genuine range to López Aretche's films. After reading Revueltas's work and thinking about what it might have meant for film culture at large, I am moved to hope that the latter wanted to see a film school that, in every class, cultivated an environment of discovery and invention, where students like López Aretche could make cinema take unexpected guises and force writers to question their ideas of what it is.

4.2 BEYOND THE MUSE: JORGE AYALA BLANCO AND CO-COMPOSING WITH CINEMA

4.2.1 Introduction: Ayala Blanco and Poetic Criticism

This chapter inquires how the work of essayist, professor and critic Jorge Ayala Blanco (b. 1942) hinges on the most ludic, generative aspects of writing as activated and animated by cinema. To a greater extent than Cube Bonifant, whom he considers “the only firm precedent

⁸⁵ Eduardo Valle Espinosa, “Es apenas el comienzo. Entrevista con Eduardo Valle Espinosa” in *Nexos*, January 1st, 1988, <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=5032> (accessed March 3rd, 2016). Valle Espinosa, also known as *El Búho* (The Owl), was, alongside Revueltas, one of the principal leaders of the Student Movement. They were even imprisoned in Lecumberri at the same time. Remembering Aretche, Espinosa notes that not only was Aretche called CUEC, but his fellow students and friends also referred to him as “Che.”

of film criticism in Mexico,”⁸⁶ Ayala Blanco made of criticism his genre of choice to develop an authorial identity, and the foregrounding of his style has been a hallmark of his work for more than five decades, starting with his first book, the landmark *La aventura del cine mexicano* (*The Adventure of Mexican Cinema*, 1968). The comparison between the two writers is more than a matter of career length. Bonifant’s columns cover subjects from politics to social events to fashion. Ayala Blanco has built his name entirely on his film writing. Besides his work on translations of prose and poetry, this is a writer for whom cinema appears to be the only topic. A closer inspection reveals, however, that in addition to being a subject, cinema is also the motivation and shaper of Ayala Blanco’s writing. His status as a literary figure, paired with the singularity of his output’s focus, makes him a writer that writes not only about cinema but *with* cinema. The sum of his work reads as an ongoing experiment to discover what happens to writing when cinema has become both the perspective and collaborator in creating texts with a poetic intent.

The experiment intimates a relationship in which cinema is a source of ideas for criticism and an associate in criticism’s creation. The distinction between being a source and an associate becomes clearer if one thinks of the bodies of work from previous chapters. Throughout the above pages, cinema has been an inspiration for writing. Tablada, Nervo, Elizondo, García Ascot and Revueltas participate in analytical and critical discourses to underline some qualities of cinema – its ghostliness, its eroticism, its foreignness and its monstrosity – and then let those qualities find their way into their poetry and fictions. In other words, these authors, by and large, reflect about cinema in their critical and theoretical writings while setting their reflections in motion in their literary

⁸⁶ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Posada, 1985), 209.

work. The critical and poetic intents remained mostly in their conventionally respective discourses, achieving a more deliberate and approximate alignment between purpose and genre choice. Revueltas, for instance, writes about montage pedagogically in the book of essays *El conocimiento cinematográfico*, and realizes his montage theories in the poetic form of his novella *El apando*. Even if these texts can never escape traces from their counterparts' sensibilities, and are always simultaneously informative and expressive, investigative and immersive, there is a consistency to the writers' knowing what kind of texts they are writing, and fulfilling the expectations of each text – reportage for chronicles, knowledge production for essays, fantasy for fictions, and so on.

For his part, Ayala Blanco does not separate the critical from the poetic. His case is not one where reflections on cinema inform the writing of poetry or fiction. The very act of criticism consists of a series of aesthetically striking verbal events, thus blurring several generic delimitations. Looking for knowledge on film criticism and film history in Ayala Blanco's books, readers who encounter his work for the first time might find something that subverts the expectations of those disciplines – not something in excess of history and criticism, but something intimately entwined with them. Alongside the exposition of facts and their evaluation, Ayala Blanco's style asserts itself to provoke an aesthetic response.

Despite its uneasy place between discourses and genres, I have termed Ayala Blanco's writing "poetic criticism" to define it as analysis through creative engagement. While the text seeks to achieve a texture akin to poetry, it does so in the service of knowledge production. Yet reading Ayala Blanco does not necessarily allow his audience to experience these effects separately or in a sequence. The critical and expressive qualities of his work happen together, or are at any rate difficult to parse without a set of reading strategies.

Rather than trying to classify the countless ways someone might read a text, I offer that another reason analysis and expression occur simultaneously in his work is that Ayala Blanco positions cinema as a collaborator in his writing. To better capture in words his viewing experience, he must follow the lead of film in arranging the structure of his pieces. As reflection and expression fuse, criticism unlocks itself to cinema, its outside, so that criticism's words try to more closely match cinema's own creations. Besides engaging in ekphrasis' vividly descriptive exercise, Ayala Blanco allows cinema to dictate the shape of his language. Cinema is no longer only inspiration, a starting point and impetus for writing, but a constant partner in creation – what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi would call a “co-composer.” Taking Manning and Massumi's term carries over their belief that, given that writing reflexively (philosophy in their case, criticism in Ayala Blanco's) is a different kind of thinking-in-action than the “generative environments” of art, these activities can invent together only if they preserve their difference. I will argue in this chapter that the operations in Ayala Blanco's work can be understood as “writing into the difference”⁸⁷ between criticism and cinema to find the points where ideas emerge from one into and through the other.

I will also explore a few consequences of co-composing with cinema. The shift in cinema's position, from inspiration to co-creator, also entails a change in the writer's conception of cinema. Placed within a certain equality with what would ostensibly be the object at the center of writing's inquiries, the writer can then see the creative process as an ecology of which she and cinema are part. The writer can thus reassess her closeness to and

⁸⁷ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, PDF book. Manning and Massumi's examples come from dance, painting, poetry and activism.

feelings toward cinema. If the current inquiry began proposing that cinema was a muse, it also observed that the writer's approach to its cinematic muse was, befitting the muses' mythology, motivated by love – a form of intense cinephilia that often equated love for cinema with Platonic admiration of or desire for a lover. Moving cinema to the category of co-composer, however, complicates that love and demands that the writer develop an intimacy with film more appropriate to its role, for in this case, the writer sees cinema as a partner rather than an ideal. As such, the writer's claims over cinema change drastically and cannot exercise any form of possession of the co-composer. Communing with cinema on that plane need not shed love from its motivations. Love can remain and even intensify with a nuance that in fact deepens affection, enables longer-lasting engagement and further encourages poetry in writing. I put forth this form of expressing love for film to complement other writing methods that seek to understand cinema through controlling, manipulating and inhabiting it with certain analytical strategies, like shot-for-shot breakdowns or the moment expansion by which writers collect or enter cinematic episodes. The poetic qualities of Ayala Blanco's criticism, I propose, express a love for cinema that practices an ethics of heuristic knowledge production. Investigating cinema by co-composing with it reveals what I take to be poetic criticism's philosophy of learning: that in the process of interrogating something, the critic-poet can come to love that something with a respect that demands finding creative ways to know and cherish it without exaggeration, stagnation or a sense of ownership. It is the invention of a love language as a sharable learning practice.

The following sections thus explore three areas as exemplified and enacted by Ayala Blanco's work: the place of the poetic in criticism, what happens to cinema in its role of co-

composer, and how the writer loves cinema when he co-composes with it.

4.2.2 Poetic Effects: Film Criticism as Aesthetic Experience

One reason to begin with Ayala Blanco's style is that it is the first striking aspect of his criticism. I declared above that it is unproductive to imagine the experience of reading Ayala Blanco as one where reflection and expression, and therefore, thought and style, can be separated. And yet the impression that a style persists in taking center stage is difficult to shake. If Ayala Blanco's conventional goal is to clarify and illuminate a particular film for the reader, his language refuses to even attempt a transparency that would prioritize such discursive objectives, preferring instead the relative opacity of his formal choices, or rather, to give presence to those choices and draw attention to them. His work exhibits copious instances of what Jan Mukařovský termed "foregrounding," or "the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components."⁸⁸ John Douthwaite explains "foregrounding" is a process of "defamiliarization," a means to counteract human habituation to its surroundings. The text that foregrounds its language, as an Ayala Blanco piece does, is effectively "[i]mpeding normal processing by showing the world in an unusual, unexpected or abnormal manner."⁸⁹ Poetic film criticism defamiliarizes readers with three contexts: the reading of criticism, the semiotic pathway by which a critical text references a cinematic work, and, finally, the cinematic work itself. Ayala Blanco's textual distortions render criticism, cinema and the relationship between the two strange and unfamiliar. It is the initial call for the adjective "poetic." It is also why some readers, like

⁸⁸ Jan Mukařovský, "Standard Language and Poetic Language" in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Adam Girvin, trans. Paul L. Garvin (New York: Routledge, 2000), 226

⁸⁹ John Douthwaite, *Towards a Linguistic Theory of Foregrounding* (Alessandria, Italy: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000), 178.

Mexican architect and filmmaker Juan José Gurrola, have been moved to claim that they'd "rather read Ayala Blanco than go to the movies,"⁹⁰ suggesting criticism can have a life independent from its source.

A look at two passages from Ayala Blanco's work should show the reader how he inflects his criticism to generate such reactions. Throughout his career, his writing has occupied two modes: a "completely essayistic style" reserved for Mexican cinema and a "capsule style" for films from the rest of the world.⁹¹ Both modes appear throughout publications that split in two strands. One strand is his alphabetical series of volumes dedicated to Mexican cinema, which began with "A" in *La aventura del cine mexicano*, which emerged from his realization that no critical essay on the history Mexican film existed, and that someone had to at least "establish an initial mapping"⁹² of all the films produced in Mexico.⁹³ The series is at the time of this writing on the "L" volume: *La lucidez del cine mexicano* (*The Lucidity of Mexican Cinema*, 2017). The other strand includes his collections of essays on current international film, which for the most part compile his weekly reviews with revisions and added sections to unify them. The constancy of both modes is so striking that it is tempting to say any passage is representative. There is an unmistakable authorial presence that remains even through a variety of experiments that diversify his style. That presence is also recognizable between his two modes of writing. As a sample of his essayistic, Mexican-film-centric mode, take the following fragment from his book *La herética del cine mexicano* (*The Heresy of Mexican Cinema*, 2006), in which he anatomizes Carlos Reygadas's *Battle in*

⁹⁰ In Sergio Raúl López, "La mirada incómoda" in *Cine-Toma* (May 2011): 26.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Carlos Monsiváis, a major literary talent at the time Ayala Blanco was still a beginner, had originally intended to write such a book, but he moved on to other projects.

Heaven (*Batalla en el cielo*, 2005), a film where a Mexican army general's driver loses control of his life after a baby he kidnapped with his wife dies accidentally:

The spiral of the virile fall has grown unstoppable in the second feature by barely thirty-four-year-old lawyer and already international director of *Japón* (2002), a brilliant if desolate heretical exercise in ethical, aesthetic and pathological terms, all of it fused, confused and refused inside a filmic form that is more than unsettling and on the verge of sickening unease. All the retrograde and grotesque ugliness of unwieldy Mexico City... seems to remit us, as in an upside-down, deserted neo-expressionism, to the depressed and depressive and depressing emotional state of its protagonist.⁹⁴

Representing his “capsule style” is this piece on the Austrian film *Blue Moon* (2002), the story of a picaresque journey through Eastern Europe that, as Ayala Blanco makes clear, defies genre boundaries. One note: the author often builds his capsular style around keywords or themes that unite a group of contemporary films. In this case, that keyword is “stalking,” which assembles recent films that show different kinds of obsessive followings. That keyword will recur throughout the pieces on the films Ayala Blanco has gathered under it. For example, *Blue Moon* enacts what he calls a “corrupt stalking,” an intense pursuit riddled with impurities both generic (see the many elements the film brings together) and identity-political:

Stalking of a melodramatic, crimi-eroto-lyrical-fantastical-soapish-screwball comedy, trashy road movie, at times disguised as a videodocumentary shot with a camcorder. Stalking of a protean entertainment with ungraspable creatures of mutable identity. Transatirical stalking of formerly socialist ruins. Stalking of a sinuous road toward the double dive of dancing marionettes into the Black Sea, to symbolize the difficult East-West homologation of a desolate nascent country called Twenty-First Century Europe.⁹⁵

As it should be clear, several poetic figures appear in these excerpts. The first fragment has an alliterative ring of quasi-homophonous repetitions. The second fragment intensifies the repetition with the keyword “stalking,” so that the text sounds like a litany composed primarily of noun phrases. It also includes a couple of neologisms and that mammoth

⁹⁴ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La herética del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Océano, 2006), 257.

⁹⁵ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *El cine actual. Palabras clave* (Mexico City: Océano, 2005), 54.

compound adjective that binds together the many genres that manifest themselves in the film. Reading either excerpt shows a sacrifice of smoothness at the risk of awkwardness and incorrectness (which are starker in an English translation), the latter accentuated by the lack of complete, proper sentences in the capsule review of *Blue Moon*.

To account for the effect of Ayala Blanco's writing, it is not enough to identify and list all its recognizably poetic moves. The fact of the writings themselves, the verbal constructions within them and whatever the reader might glean about the writer's intentions provide an unsteady set of coordinates to locate poetic qualities, since they do not consider the readers' input. Again, the sheer multiplicity of reader encounters with texts makes it challenging to classify them, but a start in this direction requires thinking of reading as a phenomenon in which readers participate in the production of poetic effects. I might begin from my own experience reading Ayala Blanco to tease out a reader's role in creating literary pleasures from film criticism. Reading his work made me far more aware of the language and style of film reviewing than any other example of the craft I had read previously. Soon I realized I was seeking not only his take or evaluation of a film, but also the surprise of a turn of phrase, or a word choice, or a an unknown term (no critic has brought more words to my attention). It is as if one of Ayala Blanco's underlying theories of cinema postulates that the medium has, at one point or another, summoned every word available in the human language. His criticism then becomes an attempt to catalog every appearance, however infrequent, of even the rarest of concepts. Yet that is only when he is not trying to invent new words (see the many neologisms, like "transatirical," in the *Blue Moon* review). The cataloging and inventing is distinctive and arresting, rich in references and sudden changes of thematic direction even while he obsessively researches single concepts through one or many films. The detailed organization of each piece, and of the books that contain

them, lays bare a didactic intent to the point that the critic's mediation between the film and the reader becomes vivid and particular. Quite apart from bringing a film's scenes to the readers' imagination, they put across another set of feelings – a sense of rhythm, a reading pace of reverberant density. Scenes are depicted, but infrequently and only in the broadest of strokes. When I have seen a film Ayala Blanco discusses, it is often difficult to match his words to specific scenes in a film. When I have not seen it, the reading seems to act against my ability to pre-visualize what images I might encounter. What I am left with are impressions and lashings of partial images, whose fleeting concreteness gives way to robust conceptual networks. The details of the films themselves, then, appear to be somewhat distant and more glaringly absent from the reading. Prompted by the texts, I have actively selected Ayala Blanco to find verbal invention before considering his insight on a specific cinematic work.

Claiming that criticism distances from its subject appears contradictory, but only if the assumed purpose of criticism is to bring the reader closer to a film, and “closer” means faithfully evoking a film's look, sound and feel. If Ayala Blanco's work approaches an aspect of watching a film, it has more to do with a film's effects on the viewer than its concrete particulars. His writing departs from the film into something that occurs when viewing the film. But before thinking about how Ayala Blanco favors departure over direct ekphrasis, it is important to note that the viewer herself partakes in obscuring a film when accessing it through criticism. For it is she who must invent the film the words reference – either her imagined version of a film she has not seen, or a mental re-envisioning of a film she has, with emphases and resonances following criticism's cues that differ from her initial viewing. A desire to remember a film with precision aside, the reader's capacity to eidetically match her imagined film to the one she saw playing on a screen is compromised by memory's susceptibility to internal and external influences. The viewer

(the reader of criticism) distances herself from the film in at least two ways: losing it to the passage of time, or mis-reconstructing it, whether willingly or unwillingly. The latter case involves an inventive element, which criticism can stimulate to greater or lesser degrees.

Ayala Blanco's criticism reads like an intense encouragement of inventiveness. His work seems to sidestep "the inevitable challenge critics face when attempting to describe in writing a cinematic sequence" by finding an alternative to both impulses of ekphrasis listed above: that of "transparency in discourse," and the hope of "bringing things alive in writing." What does come to life is something akin to a reader's experience of viewing the film. I mean akin in the sense that I call both watching and reading *experiences* – that is, they are phenomenal events, occurrences of perception and consciousness. Pursuing artistic effects (which most of the films Ayala Blanco writes about and, I argue, his writings all do) means, for Adrian Pilkington, attempting "the accurate expression and communication of the qualitative or phenomenal aspects of experience."⁹⁶ Endeavors in pursuit of artistic effects, in turn, become experiences themselves. What distinguishes those experiences from other qualitative moments is what Pilkington calls "aesthetic qualia," his term for "intense, precise and focused phenomenal state[s]."⁹⁷ Qualia encourage audiences to exercise and develop an 'introspective acuity' that allows them to identify, extend, savor and learn from aesthetic experiences that are unique and specific. They ignite in the observer "a wide exploration of context that reorganizes encyclopedic memory and establishes and rearranges links between concepts."⁹⁸ Pilkington's idea attempts to cover all aesthetic experiences, but few descriptions better suit what Ayala Blanco's writing very clearly

⁹⁶ Adrian Pilkington, *Poetic Effects: A Relevance Theory Perspective* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2000), 169.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

embodies – his books, all glossaries and compendia, are veritable encyclopedias where unexpected relationships follow one another at a staggering clip. The compulsively associative writing folds upon the reader, attracting her to its own intricacies and strengthening her investment in the act of reading the text. So engulfed in reading, the reader engages with an Ayala Blanco piece like she would with a discreet artistic encounter. As for the films in his reviews, they are not objects with precise features to accurately commit to words, but aesthetic experiences in themselves. His criticism has, in short, a poetic effect whose intensity approaches film's, matching the latter's status as an aesthetic event. David Bordwell once referred to the “tonal mimicry” of a film that cinephile criticism can achieve in its best moments.⁹⁹ Ayala Blanco's writings imitate film by meeting it in the sphere of artistry. They are investigations of the poetic effects of film by the induction of poetic effects in writing.

The difference between poetic effect and poetic intent matters insofar readers acknowledge that all texts might deliver an aesthetic experience, whether it was the authors' plan or not. It is a legitimate reading strategy to linger on the shapes and rhythms of all sentences. Recognizing the difference underlines that poetic effects and poetic intent can exist outside the generic conventions of poetry. Something like criticism can be written with poetic effects in mind. A consecutive question involves distinguishing between linguistic features that signify poetry (clues that suggest the writer meant to achieve a musical, pleasurable feeling, or the distortion of reading through the foregrounding of language) and the elements of writing that intensify the experiential and qualitative aspects of reading. The capsule review below, of Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002), exemplifies that distinction:

⁹⁹ David Bordwell, “Academics vs. Critics” in *Film Comment*, May/June 2011, <http://www.filmlinc.com/film-comment/article/never-the-twain-shall-meet> (accessed on October 13th, 2011).

Seduction of a plurisexual erotic thriller with a deliciously deranged plot that only redeems itself through the virtuosity of its brilliant, puffed-up execution (crane tilts / probing tracking shots / prolonged split screens / smash cuts / spy cameras everywhere / sudden darkneses like epidemic blindness), which ceaselessly moves from astonishment to formal stupor. Seduction of an erotanatic intensity as magnificent as that hyperfragmented, futuristic lesbian tryst by the urinals during a Cannes premiere or that Parisian crash-possession by sumptuous street blindings. Seduction of a fictional irony forever provocative and absorbing. Seduction of the abyss of the double (present in *Sisters* [1973] and *Body Double* [1984]), of mortuary hauntings (from *Carrie* [1976] and *Dressed to Kill* [1980]), of techno-voyeuristic simultaneity (from *Blow-Out* [1981] and of the orgasmic enjoyment of heists through a substitute fracture (from *Mission: Impossible* [1996]): it is all elevated to new levels of metaphysical fascination and vertigo. Seduction of the Borgean, Tykwer-Lynch fictional effect that allows the fracture and correction of the plot beyond a maddening fate. Seduction of an unbound film for filmmakers (“a purely abstract formal device, a theoretical fantasy” according to Jean-Marc Lalanne). Seduction of an ultratechnological cinema in its purest state that, like the unleashed libido of the woman who saves her self-destructive ringer after running into her outside a bathroom, conquers rational dreaming, willing to slyly recreate the tale as if someone else were writing it.¹⁰⁰

Linguistically, Ayala Blanco’s poetic intent is visible. Those who have seen the film or are familiar with De Palma’s exuberant filmmaking might agree with the appropriateness of criticism that is equally voluptuous and profligate with its references. In a single phrase, Ayala Blanco piles on calls to the forking storylines of Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1998), David Lynch’s *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), and Borges’s fictions. If a filmmaker demands such treatment, De Palma is certainly it. There is the insistent, prayer-like, expansive repetition of “seduction,” and the quick shifts of reading perspectives, from intertextual analysis in one noun phrase to visual aesthetics in the next. The rendering of scenes without even a minimum of narrative context makes them sound truly alien and dream-like, particularly the “Parisian crash-possession by sumptuous street blindings.” Note how even the placement of slashes within the parenthetical segment suggest the contiguous ordering of verses that should really be stacked on the page, one on top of the other. The text alludes to the genre of poetry, but since it stubbornly remains

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Coria, *Taller de Cinefilia*, 47-48.

criticism, it creates a productive confusion that inserts new preoccupations for the reader. The paratactical arrangement of noun phrases and its accelerated juxtaposition of concepts push the reader to face the role of the senses and the mental processes involved in absorbing the text. The text demands attention, perhaps even backtracking and re-reading. The act of reading becomes more personal, an event particular to the reader for how it asserts its own opening of multiple avenues of thought.

What is more, the text seeks to capture the film's qualia, or something about the film inaccessible to a viewer except through the actual watching of the film. Instead of partially reproducing the film itself for the reader, the review grants an experience of comparable aesthetic engagement. For José Felipe Coria, it is necessary to have seen the film to understand what the author means,¹⁰¹ which negates to some extent the purpose of film journalism. The expectation is that Ayala Blanco will report on the film to orient the viewers' choice of screen entertainment. Of course, most journalistic criticism under the category of "review" displays the same condition – the thoughts in a review tend to grow clearer after the reader has viewed the films under consideration. But that Ayala Blanco's writing seems unconcerned with the task of situating the reader in the film indicates he is after something other than mimicry. That something, I propose, is what cinema offers not just beyond language, but beyond images. Listing camera movements and editing techniques without hinting at their content (what the camera captures, what the editing brings together), and inventorying scenes with a mixture of broad strokes and eccentrically specific adjectives, perform more functions than just explaining to the reader what they might see, or have seen, in the film. One cannot "see" camera movements or split screens unless there is something in the frame, nor can one entirely lock onto a mental image from scene

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 48.

descriptions that are simultaneously partial and vibrant (what does a “crash-possession by sumptuous street blinding” look like?). To paraphrase Josiah McElheny, the mention of these empty visual-rhetorical techniques, these visions without images, creates a “non-reflective abstraction,”¹⁰² an access to visionary perception through objects that do not imitate something already available, but that intuit the presence of something unknown: the film’s spell, its singular power to transform the viewer’s interiority in its unique way. There is mimicry and reference to images and scenes in the review, but the overarching impression is one of a potentiality, something that the senses cannot reach and language cannot represent.

For some critics and scholars, those unreachable areas are precisely the realm of criticism. Writing about the work of German film critic Frieda Grafe (who wrote during the sixties and seventies), Adrian Martin offers that she held an idea of film art that, on the surface, reinterprets its graphic and aural particularities to understand it from a phenomenal standpoint: “Cinema is a reservoir of drives, surges and displacements of energy, waves of unruly emotion contending with myriad repressive forces...” Martin observes Grafe’s writing is able to recognize and reflect that vision of cinema in order to put into words that movement of energy, which for Martin is “something impossible to describe... a pure intensity.”¹⁰³ If it is trying to describe the indescribable, isn’t criticism also trying to deliver an aesthetic experience? It is when it searches into language’s outside that criticism makes the most persuasive case for its literariness. For Italo

¹⁰² Josiah McElheny, “Proposal for Total Reflective Abstraction” in *Cabinet* 14, Summer 2004, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/14/mcelheny2.php> (accessed February 12th, 2017). McElheny, a sculptor, based this blown glass project on a little-known art experiment that Buckminster Fuller and Isamu Noguchi carried out in 1929. McElheny writes: “Fuller and Noguchi envisioned an experience of art and a vocabulary of design based on a philosophy of total reflectivity. The proposed term, Total Reflective Abstraction, suggests that the final goal of abstraction is to create a unity of all that exists within the visual field, in order to remake the very experience of seeing. As Fuller imagined it: ‘In the brain of the viewer there would be induced a composite constellation of pattern information permitting the secondarily derived recognition of the invisible sculpture’s presence and dimensional relationships.’”

¹⁰³ Martin, “Incursions,” 66.

Calvino, “[t]he struggle of literature is in fact the struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said; what stirs literature is the call and attraction of what is not in the dictionary.”¹⁰⁴ Not despite of, but because of its ravenously inclusive, lexicographic approach, Ayala Blanco’s work highlights that which lies outside the grasp of words. The flurry of maximalist adjectives (there are four invented compound adjectives in the *Femme Fatale* review that use prefixes like “hyper” and “ultra”) and neologisms (including recurring favorite “erothanatic,” a linkage of Eros and Thanatos) can only declare their insufficiency in recreating the film precisely, and the writer’s scramble to overcome the limits of his trade. That is its leading poetic attribute, its claim to its becoming an aesthetic experience.

4.2.3 More than a Modicum of Art: Criticism in the Shadow of Cinema

There are problems with calling criticism an aesthetic event, the most important of which is perhaps an apparent trivialization of discursive categories. Martin’s analysis of Grafe’s work raises those objections on two fronts: the necessary differences between cinema and literature and between criticism and cinema. If cinema is not the “reservoir of drives, surges and displacements of energy” Grafe believes it is, Martin infers, then “it is nothing, mere literature or theater.”¹⁰⁵ It is possible to begin answering by restating that the argument is not that criticism is literature, but that it can emphasize its literariness as a means of investigation. Criticism must identify itself as criticism to make sure that, no matter how florid and poetic, it continues to be a heuristic practice. It can perform its analysis through the generation of poetic effects, but that does not take it across generic distinctions so as to render them meaningless. I have not been hinting at the totalizing and

¹⁰⁴ Italo Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1997), 16.

¹⁰⁵ Martin, “Incursions,” 66.

inaccurate conclusions that everything is literature and everything is criticism. To address Martin's (and, in his reading, Grafe's) potential concerns more directly, it is not a matter of discourse confusion but of increasing the possibilities of reader responses within discourses – specifically, the allowance of poetic effects within heuristic genres. When he says that cinema is in danger of becoming “mere literature or theater,” he speaks more to Grafe's sense of the paucity of theoretical and methodological approaches to film that distinguish it from written and stage forms, which in her view did not account for cinema's recording capabilities (it is “a reservoir”) or that what it records, and then unleashes on the screen, are sensual and emotional occurrences. Cinema could become literature or theater if scrutinized with the same set of critical stances as those two. I will not dispute this alertness to medium specificity. Instead, I ask to consider that while cinema is not literature or theater, all these art forms share the capability to generate very precise and memorable phenomenal states. They are all experienced through the body and consciousness and able to transform the thoughts of their audiences in striking ways.

So is criticism. On the place of film criticism's aesthetic quality before that of the art that animates it, Martin has the following to say:

Criticism... doubles its object, ghosts it in a process that the art critic Edward Colless (2009) describes as *superabundance*. There is always something excessive, something strictly unnecessary, perhaps even something a little *diabolical* (as Colless would have it) in the act of critical description. The ways and means of critical superabundance have to end up generating their own insight, and even (all proportions kept) their own modicum of art – forever, of course, in the shadow of the greater art that is cinema – or else they will amount to precious little. This is the all-or-nothing risk ambitious criticism takes.¹⁰⁶

Two displays of modesty stand out from the above excerpt. The first is the indication that, “all proportions kept,” criticism can have its own “modicum of art.” Second is that “of course,” inserted to point out that whatever art criticism produces, it obviously must be in cinema's

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 56 (Martin's emphasis).

shadow. It is difficult not to admire, and share, the implied humility in Martin's statement. When writing from a position of genuine reverence, or love, the critic imbues her words on cinema with hope for its longevity and flourishing (what Martin calls "the search for something radically new"¹⁰⁷), and with a respect that can promote lucidity, patience, care and passion in its study, all of which stand to make the conversation around and about cinema a productive one (I will return to this question below). But then Martin concludes that there is an "all-or-nothing" attitude associated with ambitious criticism, which in his view must strive for that modicum of art and for that great insight because it would otherwise be superfluous and redundant. It must have a revelatory beauty to justify its doubling of something that is already there – that is, it has to justify its very existence. The modesty becomes bashfulness, and whatever merits criticism might have become a means of asking for permission to enter cinema's orbit.

Now, one must wonder if criticism can hope to establish a dialogue with cinema while being tacitly apologetic. Frequently assailed by charges of pretension (which, it must be said, follow cinema as well), film criticism can be maligned if it expresses any air of superiority in its judgments. It has certainly been accused of envious interloping, a condemnation that, in part, Martin is trying to defuse (Guillermo del Toro, who was a critic before becoming a filmmaker, once wrote that "[c]riticism gives one the illusion of participating in the act of creation by way of autopsy. The act is there and it exists and moves and challenges you while criticism fights to approve and validate"¹⁰⁸). Such antagonism is familiar, and I do not disagree that humility in criticism contributes to mitigating the tensions between filmmakers and critics. But reciprocity in humility must necessarily bind cinema and its criticism if the two activities choose to listen to each other. The chances of that reciprocity can be greatly enhanced with the sense that criticism

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰⁸ Guillermo del Toro and Marc Scott Zicree, *Guillermo del Toro: Cabinet of Curiosities. My Notebooks, Collections and Other Obsessions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 59.

is also the product of intelligence and creative thinking – not creative in the sense that it falsifies its impressions of cinema, but that it has the opportunity to create on its own from cinema’s cues. Apart from asking that criticism is clear-eyed, knowledgeable, and analytical, there is no reason not to also ask for inspired wordsmithing, capable of thrilling the reader with words like cinema does with its audio-images. Both cinema and its criticism can acknowledge the others’ poetic potential so that their formal interactions continue to develop. They can do more than performing the difficult balancing act Martin sets up, where every piece of criticism teeters on an unlikely, undefined edge: the place at which it can be insightful and poetic enough to get a place at the table. It might, instead, push that modicum of art as far as it can. Criticism does not have to, but it does not have to avoid doing it, either.

Then there is the question of who places limits on criticism’s art and detects when it is trying to step out of cinema’s shadow, and how that someone accomplishes those tasks. The writers themselves, and the context in which they write, provide a guide in terms of target audience and intent. Publications specialized in journalistic and academic criticism set their tolerances for the possibilities of critical playfulness. Yet, as Ayala Blanco’s work – which appears in journalistic, academic and literary platforms – attests, there is room for experimenting and for questioning what criticism is and what it is supposed to do. The idea of writers checking themselves so that they do not overstep some levels of artistry in their work seems impracticable, as is the notion that all editors should forever police some arbitrary measure that might render criticism “too poetic.” These ideas feel out of place when, for example, writers like Gabriel Blackwell publish a book as complex, enjoyable and educational as *Madeleine E.* (2016) in the United States. A commonplace book by strict generic definitions, it is part fiction, part memoir, and all sustained critical exploration of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). The eponymous Madeleine is

Madeleine Elster, the character played at one point in the film by Kim Novak. It is a work of poetic criticism if I ever saw one, letting Blackwell's encounters with the film inspire a series of epigraphic elucubrations that coalesce into a powerful account of how cinema can possess and change a viewer. Blackwell delivers a monograph that expands the knowledge of the film in historical, philosophical and aesthetic terms, all while charting how its inimitable spell reshaped his sense of being in the world. The author invokes the poetic, literary approach precisely as a means to say something new about a film whose "every frame had been pumped full of meaning and carefully explained by its critics again and again."¹⁰⁹ When he wonders what he could contribute, he decides to put together "an assemblage, a commonplace book" of his notes on the film that would also be "a homage and acknowledgement."¹¹⁰ Looking for novel approaches to the film, Blackwell thought of experimenting with literary genres. *Madeleine E.* nudges the viewer to revisit the film as a meditation on, among other themes, "the strange, subjective pliability of time."¹¹¹ Given how the book renovates interest in *Vertigo* while standing on its own literary legs, it exemplifies my belief that there is no danger of literalizing Gurrola's hyperbolic preference of criticism over the actual viewing of movies, even if criticism, like Blackwell's or Ayala Blanco's, finds excuses to appeal to the reader's aesthetic sense with an intensity that could match cinema's.

More visible than clashes between filmmakers and critics over the latter's artistic intentions are the controversies among critics themselves. Ayala Blanco's style has been at the center of a major rupture in the history of Mexican film criticism. In his early twenties, he signed on to become a member of *Nuevo Cine*. After that group's partial disbanding at the termination of their homonymous magazine, its members began creating journals of their own that made

¹⁰⁹ Gabriel Blackwell, *Madeleine E.* (San Francisco: Outpost19, 2016), 28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

competitors out of former allies. A rivalry ignited between one of *Nuevo Cine*'s most influential members, Emilio García Riera, and Ayala Blanco. Rogelio Segoviano summarizes the divide noting that these writers "represented each of the antagonistic groups. The former were accused of having been bought by [President] Luis Echeverría's government in order to praise state-financed films (and their directors), while the latter came to be known as 'snipers' who liked nothing and only doled out destructive criticism."¹¹² In García Riera's words, the problem with Ayala Blanco's school of criticism was an "ideological vice: confusing the personality of characters with the personality of those portraying them."¹¹³ Their contingent, García Riera argues, brandished their ideology before anything else in their analysis, so they "shielded themselves behind their ideas to give their critical positions some prestige."¹¹⁴ The assessment is not entirely off the mark. In a 2015 interview, Ayala Blanco states that "what interests me is not the positing of a hypothesis, but to develop a series of ideas through the films themselves."¹¹⁵ He develops those ideas, which theoretically come from the film, within the framework of a variety of language games – most notably, thematic glossaries and expansions of terms – that make plain his goal of creating a language of his own to speak about cinema. The invention of a language carries a literary ambition that in his work becomes a narrative concurrent with the task of describing and evaluating the films. He is also open about his recognition of the value of pushing back against popular opinion and general consensus. Choices of that sort shape García Riera's objection that Ayala Blanco imposes the critic's presence on the films. Rather than "shielding"

¹¹² Rogelio Segoviano, "Gustavo, el cine puede esperar" in *Confabulario de El Universal*, Nov. 13th, 2013, <http://confabulario.eluniversal.com.mx/gustavo-el-cine-puede-esperar/> (accessed on May 16th, 2015).

¹¹³ Emilio García Riera, "Prólogo. Por qué hay que leer a Leonardo García Tsao" in Leonardo García Tsao, *El ojo y la navaja. Ensayos y críticas de cine* (Mexico City: Punto de lectura, 2008), 14.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in José David Cano, "Jorge Ayala Blanco: la desbordante pasión por el cine" in *Forbes México*, May 8th, 2015, <http://www.forbes.com.mx/jorge-ayala-blanco-la-desbordante-pasion-por-el-cine/#gs.0hCmrT4> (accessed on June 12th, 2015).

himself, as García Riera put it, it seems Ayala Blanco catapulted himself to the forefront of his conversations.

At the same time, both groups outwardly share a goal of listening to the films first and speak from the evidence they provide, and chastise their counterparts with having illegitimate motivations. Political alliances certainly drew battle lines, but I would also suggest that the disagreement possibly originated, in part, from Ayala Blanco's off-kilter way with words. The notion of the critic putting himself before cinema may be met with genuine resistance, since it suggests, at the very least, misplaced priorities. Highlighting cinema, the assumed critical belief dictates, must be paramount. But such a rechanneling of attention can happen through such diverse rhetorical modes that one wonders if Ayala Blanco's case is special. Ayala Blanco chooses to lean heavily on those elements that, per Martin, are excessive and unnecessary, even if they can also be the cradle of poetic insights. Precisely because they seem disproportionate and gratuitous, their increased presence might provoke strong negative reactions. Maybe García Riera was responding to criticism that did not look like his concept of criticism. Underneath the ideological collision is a sense that the operations that define criticism are at stake. A historical glance demands an inclusive outlook, since both sides have built substantial legacies: the late García Riera is best known today as a film historian, revered for the wealth of knowledge he managed to propagate (his interest in documenting distinguished him from his *Nuevo Cine* colleagues). Ayala Blanco continues to cement his critic persona on the originality, eccentricity and adventurousness of his iconoclastic writings. Risking cliché, one might say there is room for both.

Not that all involved pursued that outcome. Active and lively debate along those critical lines would enrich the discourse of a film culture. That both Ayala Blanco and García Riera

found outlets for their work ensured the debate could continue, now passed on to their respective disciples Gustavo García and Leonardo García Tsao (García Riera died in 2002; despite sharing a last name, there is no relation between these critics). But in Ayala Blanco's telling, an aggressive campaign attempted to silence him. "Emilio García Riera's gang," he says, "threatened to pull their pieces from certain magazines and journals if they published my work." He calls the Spanish exile his "enemy. He was a psychotic who wanted to own all critical opinions... I was too experienced to have to ask 'excuse me, sir, can I like this film? It's ridiculous. I look at people like José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent [formerly of *Nuevo Cine*] with horror. They were people with powerful connections who began mocking me as soon as my name had a minimum amount of weight."¹¹⁶ Fortunately, the animosity and maneuvering did not prevent poetic criticism from continuing to be a definite presence in Mexican film writing. Ayala Blanco's work found a substantial readership alongside García Riera's in popular and academic circles. He started teaching film history at CUEC at twenty-three, an activity he continues to this day (García Riera would lead the film studies program at the University of Guadalajara). The consistency, magnitude and irreverence of his cinephile games, by now spread across countless reviews and over thirty books, made his criticism stand out from the groups, movements and institutions to which he belonged. As of this writing, readers can find his reviews and essays in *Confabulario*, the weekly cultural supplement, both in print and online, of *El Universal* (the same paper that published the work of his spiritual mentor Cube Bonifant). He joined *Confabulario* after a long-held position with the economy-oriented daily *El Financiero*, which started publishing his reviews on its website only in 2014. Poetic criticism has more than

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Mónica Maristain, "El cine me hace delirar: Jorge Ayala Blanco" in *sinembargo.mx*, November 15th, 2015, <http://www.sinembargo.mx/07-11-2015/1541385> (accessed on November 27th, 2015).

survived. In Ayala Blanco's body of work, it makes a case for standing alongside cinema in the light.

4.2.4 The Possibility of Collaboration: Cinema as Co-Composer

Larger than the concern of poetic criticism overshadowing cinema is the question of the kind of knowledge a poetic track produces. The above sections argue how self-consciously pushing the poetic elements of criticism approximate the reader to the experiential aspects of watching film. But there is still the problem of whether or not these texts are saying something sharable about the works of the moving image they tackle. Each piece of criticism might appear to the reader like a film does, with qualities that make it a very specific experience. Next, one must wonder if Ayala Blanco's poetic criticism concerns itself not only with the particularity of verbal invention, but also with concept creation, the task of knowledge production that, for Warren Buckland, aims at "optimizing agreement."¹¹⁷ To think about how poetic criticism generates its concepts, and to further clarify how it comes about its poetic qualities (its creative process, as it were), I will now turn to a theory of its composition. It begins at criticism's liberation from cinema's shadow.

If criticism decides to have more than a modicum of art and work next to rather than under cinema, it places itself in a non-hierarchical relationship among creative acts. Ayala Blanco expresses the repositioning in two ways: his writing's clear literary ambition (previously described in this chapter) and his wish to conduct in romantic, immanent fashion,¹¹⁸ "[t]he analysis of each film within the film itself!"¹¹⁹ The involvement of cinema in its own analysis

¹¹⁷ Buckland, *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions*, 181.

¹¹⁸ For the concept of "immanent criticism," see Walter Benjamin, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913 - 1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland and Ian Balfour (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁹ Quoted in José David Cano, "Jorge Ayala Blanco: la desbordante pasión por el cine."

typifies how film and its criticism are part of what Manning and Massumi call “a cacophonous ecology of... experience,” in that one activity “is never without echoes”¹²⁰ of the other. Key to observing their ecological rapport is the realization that both are modes of thought in action, and that analyzing a film within itself means, on the critic’s part, finding in the film the mechanics of thought that writing and cinema share as creative activities. In that state of equality, they can “co-compose.” Manning and Massumi’s notion of co-composing is helpful because it not only imagines that artistic creation is a form of thinking – it also tells us that writing is action. Turning cinema’s experience into thoughts (into words) is thus not criticism’s only job. Manning and Massumi claim they write “[n]ot to tell art how to think. But to bring into relief techniques from which a singular proposition may breach.”¹²¹ Their goal, then, is language *poiesis*, an objective they share with poetic criticism as I have defined it, even if they house their work under the rubric of philosophy. Philosophy’s parity with criticism, which is present in the works of writers like Kant and Benjamin, shows the ecological mentality extends to all the activities involved in this argument – that is, the need to think about art and writing as thought-in-action, about philosophy as a form of criticism, and about both criticism and philosophy as vessels of literariness.

Again, before all distinctions cease to apply, a consideration of the complex dynamics between the common creative provenance of aesthetic activities and their uniqueness as experiences is in order. Grouping cultural acts in an ecology does not iron out the differences of their expressions – hence the “cacophony” that motivates writing’s desire to make sense of the interconnected thought-acts. Each event becomes an aesthetic experience and a moment of conceptual emergence because of its specificity (they are looking for “singular propositions”)

¹²⁰ Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, PDF book.

¹²¹ Ibid.

and its encounter with the specificity of another poetic event. The writer who wishes to turn to verbal expression to produce knowledge about another thought-act composes within the inventive impulse that writing and its activity of interest (in our case, cinema) have in common, all while meeting the latter at the moment when they are most disparate. As Manning and Massumi put it, the writer “articulates in the fragile difference between modes of thought.”¹²² The latter expression cogently sums up the delicate interplay between the creative equality of thought-acts and their separateness. The fragility comes from the fact of their shared status as thought-actions that result from inventive labor. Yet the difference is a definite space for the writer to intervene. Writing must remain writing – indeed, it must be more intensely, more playfully, language, inventing for itself what other thought-acts have pushed it to discover. It is that difference that the writer of poetic film criticism leans on to make insightful claims about cinema. In order to show clearly that something has been learned from film – that a new concept has breached – criticism has to be more itself. It has to differentiate itself from cinema more sharply, because the differentiation goes both ways. In distinguishing itself from cinema, criticism highlights cinema’s contours with greater, harsher clarity. The less criticism attempts transparency in discourse, the more it reflects light back at film.

To inspect how Ayala Blanco writes into the fragile difference between cinema and criticism, see his take on the film *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) for an example of what reads like a more conventional review. Of special interest are the tendencies apparent in his plot synopses and accounts of scenes and sequences. Notice that the fragment below details the film’s storyline, and one of its scenes, in some depth (for further context, this time the keyword is “solidarity”):

¹²² Ibid.

Thirteenth feature of the extremely uneven fairy-tale comedian [*comediógrafo feérico*] Ron Howard... dramatizes both the attempts to hold on to objective reality and the coexistence with his schizophrenic hallucinations of the real-life autistic mathematician John Forbes Nash (Russell Crowe, reeking from overacting), who started by making up a roommate (Paul Bettany) who even had a helpless niece (Tanya Clark) to allay his loneliness at Princeton and ended up frantically decoding encrypted messages in banal publications in service of a supposedly secret agent from the Pentagon (Ed Harris), omnipresent even in the inevitable wedding of the erotically premature [*eroabrupto*] scientist to a super-tolerant student (Jennifer Connelly as a portable Mother Teresa). Solidarity of a *one-idea-picture* that forces the viewer to take seriously the professor's delusions and worry about the baby dying of suspense in a bathtub. Solidarity of a light, puerile and rosy version of the schizophrenic process of the mathematician in *Pi* (Aronofsky, 1998), which drove the film's form megalomaniacally mad and didn't end up hanging out with personal hallucinations while enjoying fortunate, stoic celebrity or the self-satisfied reception of the Nobel Prize in 1994 with grey wigs right out of a Tin Tan movie.¹²³

Let us first acknowledge that the tone and effects of Ayala Blanco's signature touches are present here as well, this time dealing with a film that, unlike *Batalla en el cielo*, *Blue Moon*, and *Femme Fatale* above, he clearly finds lacking. He likens Ron Howard to Aristophanes with the archaic term *comediógrafo* (a playwright who writes comedy). *Feérico*, meaning both "fairy-like" and "related to fairy tales," is a very unusual term in Spanish outside mentions of literary fantasy, further complicating his conception of Howard's career with referential density. At the very end, he mentions Germán Valdés "Tin Tan" (1915-1973), a hugely popular actor from the *Edad de Oro* that, while familiar to Mexican readers, still relies on knowledge outside Howard's film.

Second, there is the speed at which the piece delivers information about the film's events. Above I argued that Ayala Blanco's writing places demands on the reader that might make the reading process noticeably wayward. That is because there is almost no space between the many instances of foregrounding through references, associations and unexpected turns of phrase. The text combines the fragmentary structure of a lexicon (where every new term requires definition)

¹²³ Ayala Blanco, *El cine actual. Palabras clave*, 345.

with an almost palpable impatience to spell out the necessary contextual features.¹²⁴ In other words, compounding and complicating the review's closely-packed texture, sentences run long, persistently directing the readers' eyes forward while adding many semantic curiosities that would slow that forward momentum down. And there is once again a breathlessness in the refusal to break for a paragraph or to stop the accumulation of terms. The text blocking remits the reader to something one never finds in Ayala Blanco: pauses to set up specific scenes for close analysis. Ayala Blanco drops the reader right into a moment in the film (Nash's endangering of his child by neglecting him during his bath to follow another hallucination) in the middle of a zeugmatic sentence, without explaining it in enough detail for the reader to visualize it. That refusal to stop and place the viewer in the film as a sequence of scenes, or to favor any particular aspect of it, abandons many of the features of cinephile texts. There is no lingering on details, gestures, bits of business, or the special star-quality of actors – just a desire to sift the shape of his writing through the sieve that each film creates in its completeness, with the words attempting to fall together at the same time.

Multiple reasons could explain the apparent rush to carry out every relevant bit of information as quickly as possible. Publications, both in print and online, place word count limits and deadlines on journalistic reviews, all of which foment concision. The genre is also full of impressionistic, necessarily terse plot synopses. It is not a phenomenon unique to Ayala Blanco or Mexican film writing. But even when writing in the more flexible space of a print book format, Ayala Blanco's essays almost never contain shot-for-shot breakdowns, extended discussions of sequences, or any measured study of film elements for the reader to gradually

¹²⁴ It must be said that such procedure exposes some aversion to research, evident in his assertion that John Nash is portrayed as a person in the autism spectrum or his flippant perpetuation of the highly contested idea that the Nobel laureate was schizophrenic. While Ayala Blanco recognizes how the film's treatment of mental illness can appear as facile and oblivious to its facts, he also declines to delve deeper into some contextual and historical matters surrounding the production. Inaccuracies are not uncommon in his output

absorb and construct a concrete image from the audiovisual work. He treats films as conceptual and experiential wholes rather than collections of moments, even though the latter appears to be a friendlier path toward reconstructing a motion picture in the reader's mind. Instead, his criticism seems to actively separate itself from the films.

I indicated earlier how Ayala Blanco's strategies served to connect the reader with the film as an experience rather than as an object with precise features. A parallel goal is distinction, not mimicry or kinship. Rather than trying to transparently recreate a film through description, Ayala Blanco's criticism sharpens the features of cinema by contrasting its qualities with those of a film, and by letting film, in turn, contrast its qualities against criticism. Only when both activities stand whole in their interrelation can they co-compose. While co-composing, criticism and cinema "dip into the same creative pond,"¹²⁵ but play their own instruments, each medium underscoring the other's difference. The purposefully terse (and at times vague) synopses lean on language rather than an ekphrastic link to the film, and they are one feature of Ayala Blanco's prose that mark his reviews primarily as acts of writing. So is Blanco's concern with totality and juxtaposition (similar to Revueltas's in *El apando*, but in essay form), which might resemble mimicry, but is also prose-centric, responding with verbal abundance to cinema's tapestry of images instead of borrowing the lessons of montage.

The consistent foregrounding also demonstrates a firmly literary grasp of cinema. That would seem exactly the problem, something Adrian Martin or even Frieda Grafe, Martin's subject, would find unproductive. Yet the literary identity of Ayala Blanco's criticism extends to its perspective to provide the necessary contrast to cinema. He might want to develop ideas from the film's themselves, but he applies a novelistic understanding to the medium of film. Symptomatic of the application is his habit of starting every new sentence in his capsule reviews

¹²⁵ Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, PDF book.

with keywords or, in other instances, the essaying of several keywords or key concepts to the same film. In addition to the examples gathered above, where the keyword is interspersed throughout the review at the start of every noun phrase, Ayala Blanco lets ideas proliferate by creating variations on a film's title. A case in point is how he writes four alternative equivalences of Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994), all separated by the conjunction "or:" the film is "the transvestite artist," or "the ignored visionary," or "the love of resemblance," or "the sublimation of shoddiness."¹²⁶ Ayala Blanco credits Gerard Genette and Bakhtin with his "preoccupation" with "core verbs or ideas that can encompass or synthesize a story's action."¹²⁷ It's important to remember that both Genette and Bakhtin speak about the structure of literary texts, referring most frequently to novels. Genette in particular argues that narrative functions as "the expansion of a verb,"¹²⁸ so it is possible, through analysis, to locate that verb and thus trace the ways in which the narration extends and transforms it. By applying Genette's idea to film, Ayala Blanco suggests that a theory of narrative developed for literature can also describe narrative in cinema. He does not account for that theoretical transfer or stop to consider whether film narrative also expands verbs. The direct application of Genette's narratology betrays a positioning of film within discourses linked to literary storytelling, or at least a favoring of narrative (instead, of, say, the image or the mechanical properties of the medium) as an entry point into film for criticism.

Paradoxically, it is there that cinema's singularity is most glaringly underlined. In thinking literarily about cinema, criticism itself becomes more literary, thus letting everything in cinema that is literature's outside stand out. The writing does not pretend to be cinematic, or to

¹²⁶ Jorge Ayala Blanco, "Burton y las glorias del antimito" in *El cine, juego de estructuras* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 2002), 54-57.

¹²⁷ Ayala Blanco, *El cine actual. Palabras clave*, 19-20.

¹²⁸ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 30.

speak for cinema about what it is – it tries to create conditions for cinema to speak for itself, participating on its own in a cross-media conversation. With that in mind, Ayala Blanco does not make conceptual in-roads toward a film, instead offering verbal structures from which cinema can bounce. It would appear that, for Ayala Blanco, the most revealing writing on cinema must inevitably lead away from it so that it preserves its completeness. The Mexican critic's borrowing of Genette, for one, discards the penetration and fragmentation of film through analysis – film has to be whole to co-compose.

Take one kind of fragmentation: the attribution of a film's qualities to a narrator – that is, a director. Looking at films in the context of a filmmaker's work tends to break them down into lists of recurring concerns or formal choices that determine their effects. Even as he acknowledges the director's work, Ayala Blanco treats images as an organism with an autonomous life, to the point of downplaying a narrator's presence. In the above excerpts, the director's appearance in the text is brief and quickly followed by discussions of the film's behavior. On *Batalla en el cielo*, he says it is the film's "form" that is "on the verge of sickening unease" without delving into the director's choices. Moreover, he often argues that filmmakers provide their most powerful work when they actively attempt to remove themselves from the filmmaking and instead obey a master other than their own obsessions, interests and tastes – all hallmarks of a "personal" cinema that means the author can claim possession of it. Look at his comments on Mexican director Felipe Cazals's debut film, *La manzana de la discordia* (*The Apple of Discord*, 1968). Ayala Blanco attempts to evaluate the filmmaker by where he places his thinking – in his body or in the cinematic apparatus, an equation of instinct and machine that cuts through "bourgeois myths of artistic content and human themes" that supposedly legitimize a work of art, and create a "film-object" – that is, separate from an author/master – "a ready-

made” that breaks down the audience’s “affective projections or ideological defenses.” It is an “anti-narrative, anti-lyrical, anti-psychological and anti-sentimental” cinema, a cinema liberated from the properties that make it a vehicle of deceit, of simplification, idealization and falsification of reality.¹²⁹ *La manzana de la discordia* is critical and self-critical as it lays bare its own artifice and establishes distance, not intimate contact, as the “rigorous commitment” of the filmmaker with his subject. The critic even compares *La manzana de la discordia* with Godard’s *Les carabiniers* (1963) as a film that brought about an aesthetic that finally denied the possibility of cinema ever having an invisible form, one that would be assimilated as “natural” and that would therefore obstruct ideological critique (as did, for instance, Hollywood cinema).¹³⁰ Once it becomes a liberated object, the filmmaker will follow the film’s cue to realize, rather than dictate, its becoming.

Similarly, as Dorothy J. Hale remarks, Genette’s verb-centric theory “absents” the narrator’s subjectivity from the narration. If everything in a narrative springs from the verb, then the verb originates the act of uttering, not the other way around: “[l]imiting subjectivity to an attribute of or back-formation from the ‘verb’ (rather than, say, making the verb an attribute of the subject)... Genette’s grammatical model establish[es] narratorial subjectivity as an intrinsic property of narrative discourse.”¹³¹ It is thus congruent for Ayala Blanco to embrace Genette, for if film narrative tells itself, as it were, like literary narrative does, then film sheds authorial ownership. It belongs to no one and therefore remains itself, whole and independent.

Compare Ayala Blanco’s debt to literature to that of his colleague José Revueltas. For the latter, the film director is a definite author, and does the greatest service to cinematic art the more

¹²⁹ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La búsqueda del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Posada, 1986), 432-433.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹³¹ Dorothy J. Hale, *Social Formalism: the Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 81.

she tries, through cinematic means, to imitate literature. In a 1963 essay on Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960), Revueltas observed that as the then modern novel stopped resembling the novels themselves (that is, those from the nineteenth century), cinema began to resemble the novel, becoming more cinematic, more itself, during the approximation.¹³² The approximation became necessary, we will remember from the previous section, because cinema started constructing what Revueltas calls (predating, in admittedly much more schematic form, Deleuze's affection-image) "a *succeeding* that is less dependent on visible action than on an *internal* happening of the drama, or, in other words, where the conflicted relationships become less visible, less subordinated to the formal and exterior simplicity of such happenings."¹³³ An apt example is the final caress that Claudia (Monica Vitti) bestows upon Sandro's (Gabrielle Ferzetti) head. A simple gesture acquires dizzying complexity for its lack of obvious motivation, which Revueltas attributes to Antonioni himself, and to the pity he feels for Sandro's existential state.¹³⁴ The sensory-motor gives rise to the internally-propelled picture of the *cine-novela*,¹³⁵ the kind of film where Revueltas finds audiovisual solutions to novelistic configurations of affect, and one that binds the characters to the filmmaker – Claudia's pity is Antonioni's pity; she is his device to construct the film's automatic mechanism of conceptual emanations (what Deleuze called "the spiritual automaton"¹³⁶). So, a closer approximation to the novel makes the role of the film author more deeply perceptible, mimicking the apparent isolation of the writer. For Revueltas, the more "writerly" cinema becomes, the more it acquires characteristics that separate it from the writer's craft. The characters and story cease to be characters (fictional "people," with

¹³² José Revueltas, *ECC*, 93-94.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 95

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (New York: Continuum, 2005), 151.

pasts, memories, and identities) and story to explicitly emerge as an author's tools – they become, for the filmmaker, what words are to the writer. Like Ayala Blanco, Revueltas traces the borders between cinema and writing, making each stand out more, through their proximity and kinship.¹³⁷ The difference is that, while Revueltas sets terms for the possibility for film to amaze and thus spark creativity, he sees the audiovisual expression of the literary – that is, the internal and conceptual – as a goal for the filmmakers, who assert themselves through their control of their films. Cinema never becomes unreachable and autonomous. The literary distinguishes cinema by expanding its audiovisual language, but also prevents it from the unattainability that would make it a partner in creation. It might have moved Revueltas to write, but he wrote without departing from film to the extent that films and writing release each other like they do in Ayala Blanco. For Revueltas's own critical and pedagogical work (if not for his reactions to films involving actions other than writing), film is always an end, a result of inspiration, not its sharer.

The final separation of film occurs when Ayala Blanco does try to derive a theory from his criticism. The paradoxes continue in that the wholeness of cinema, the one that serves to identify it as an entity of its own, involves considering it, like Huerta does, an “impure” object. In his conclusion to *La aventura...*, the theory at which Ayala Blanco has arrived through his criticism says that “cinema has ceased to be an art, or the supposed synthesis of all the arts, to be itself... an impure object, a dynamic ruled by its specific laws, a language that has declared the independence of its visions and becomes a swarm of myths and creates the privileged origin of

¹³⁷ Along these lines, see also Bazin's high-modernist notion that an adaptation of a book, to be successfully realistic, must pursue the literary rather than the “cinematic,” as, for example, Bresson did with *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951). For Bazin, Bresson's film is “a triumph of cinematographic realism” because in it, “the screen... [is] handed back to literature.” See Bazin, “*Le Journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson” in *What is Cinema? Vol. I*, 141.

an autonomous culture.¹³⁸ Several interrogations intersect here. Calling cinema a “dynamic” has the double effect of enhancing cinema’s connection to something outside of it (or rather, extends its reach outside the screen, the celluloid, the projector, and perhaps the theater or wherever a film is watched) and of getting a cautious lock on its uniqueness. If it is a dynamic, not an art form, then it must involve something other than its forms, its production, and its reception. But it must also be a relational event that can be pinpointed. Why must it be pinpointed? Because, in locating its autonomy, one will also locate how cinema provides a window to a cultural practice that serves as counterpoint to, rather than as a support of, historical reality. Cinema can co-compose with criticism because it has acquired enough complexity to mount a dialogue, to offer thoughts back to its makers.

What Ayala Blanco offers is a non-medium-specific argument for the singularity of cinema. He denies the possibility of an essence: “cinema escapes vertically, it takes its own steps forward, it bursts preconceptions, pigeon-holes, elemental judgments,”¹³⁹ only to attest to its difference not just from the arts, but from everything else. It is cinema not as an art form, but as a series of relationships between the films, the filmmakers, the spectators, and the critics. Finally, Ayala Blanco argues for cinema as “a place where dissidence self-immolates.”¹⁴⁰ That powerful image, which he does not explain, brings to mind Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức’s 1963 protest (and those of his followers) against Ngô Đình Diệm’s regime in South Vietnam. The notion that dissidence’s demonstration happens through its self-destruction preserves the separation that Ayala Blanco sees as necessary. The act of resistance of cinema burns in the light of the screen, extinguishing itself as it is realized. It stays in cinema (it contains its own

¹³⁸ Ayala Blanco, *La aventura* (1993), 429.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

transformation, its autonomous self-annihilation) in order to nudge the rest of the world into a similar awareness of its responsibility and agency.

That nudging, the push outward from the aesthetic work and into the spectators' own capabilities, underlies one principle of co-composing: the collaborators' trust that all other members of the creative ecology will contribute to the proliferation of ideas, with each one making the others aware of their limits and where, through their relationship, the limits can be overcome. Co-composing in equality means that criticism learns about itself while trying to learn about cinema. It is more precisely learning from cinema. Far from solipsism, it is the humble acknowledgement of the need of continuous self-reflection through listening. There are many ways of listening in criticism, but Ayala Blanco's poetic strand listens to change itself so it can be more itself. It turns to cinema to find opportunities to recreate its language, with the hope that it can help send other activities on their own journeys.

4.2.5 Love Changes: Rethinking the Muse through Poetic Film Criticism

Having characterized the relationship to cinema that Ayala Blanco's writing enables as one of creative equality, this final section returns to the relationship at the center of these pages: the one between a writer and her inspiration. And the initial premise noted that love is the bedrock of that pairing. The idea of poetry as an expression of love for someone has a long history, and several of its touchstones appear in this brief survey of a poetic-literary tendency in Latin American film criticism. For César Antonio Molina, it was in Renaissance literature where the invention of love was attributed to poets and their adoration of their muses: "Love, through the Middle Ages, was only God's patrimony. It could only be given fully to Him. Dante and Petrarch – in the theoretical and creative vanguard – and Manrique or Garcilaso in Spain make us realize that the

same love can completely develop among humans.”¹⁴¹ Such love was one-sided – with a man idealizing a woman – and problematic. Molina summarizes the harshest critique, which argues that love for a human muse is “one of poetry’s most terrible creations: it encourages expectations... that are never fulfilled.”¹⁴² Like Beatrice (for Dante) and Laura (for Petrarch), the ghost women inspired Latin American writers during the early decades of cinema, and even later, and were given little to say for themselves. They were objects of longing, terrified fascination, and extraordinary but uninvolved influences in the male writers’ work. With the position toward cinema his writing forges, Ayala Blanco’s poetic criticism provides a new development in the history of that love, for it is, I argue, an attempt at allowing mutuality between the elements involved in the creative act. Treating cinema like a co-composer shifts the writer’s admiration for its muse to deeper, more complex feelings. Given the added mutuality, the writer’s love for her inspiration grows fuller in its fairness and regard for the beloved.

Ayala Blanco does show signs of an unconditional love for an ideal – something closer to courtly love – when he confesses that he feels “excited” even after watching a film he deems wanting. Asked about the extent of his aversion to films that displease him, he responds that he never leaves a movie angry, and that it is “reality that makes [him] indignant, not the movies.”¹⁴³ Partially rejoinders about the importance of humor and the amusement even subpar film experiences could bring to audiences, those statements also connote that films, or cinema itself, are not be the target of his anger. Only filmmakers deserve his wrath, “because one thinks ‘what a great movie and what a shame they ruined it, those idiots.’”¹⁴⁴ That for Ayala Blanco there are no bad films, only great films that filmmakers spoil or don’t spoil, shows his belief that the world

¹⁴¹ César Antonio Molina, “*La academia de las musas*” in *Revista de Occidente* 421 (June, 2016): 79.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 80

¹⁴³ Maristain, “El cine me hace delirar: Jorge Ayala Blanco.”

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

is a better place with cinema in it. The condition of all cinema, in his eyes, is perpetually awe-inspiring and free of what the filmmakers do with and through it. It is never less than worthy of adoration and it always remains itself.

But the separation from cinema that is a precondition for co-composing with it builds upon the concept of the Renaissance muse. Ayala Blanco's poetic criticism achieves a certain equality with its muse when they co-compose, so that the poetry the muse inspires also respects the latter's wholeness and agency. In terms of cinema, respecting its agency means criticism tackles a film work with full knowledge, and acceptance, that cinema might reject criticism's analysis – that is, that the analysis is not performed with the desire to know cinema, but to have a conversation with it where misinterpretation and asymmetry can be productive outcomes. If cinema is the potential beloved to which the cinephile critic approaches with her words, poetic criticism's creations are propositions that do not place impossible expectations upon cinema, instead giving it opportunities to escape, to show where the analysis fails to expose or resolve a film's mysteries. Poetic criticism, in fact, welcomes and protects those mysteries. Films always keep something to themselves when reviewed by Ayala Blanco. In co-composing, the violence of a lover's imposed, unrealistic hopes upon the beloved gives way to open-ended, fluid exchanges that incite endless creation. The need for precision and exactitude in non-poetic forms of criticism make claims toward owning cinema through knowledge. Instead of the collecting impulse behind a great deal of cinephile criticism and its implied colonial ethos (the occupation of a film), Ayala Blanco's writing demurs at the idea of possessing the film itself or anything about it. Sectioning a sequence to make his points, or slowing the film down in order to arrest, appropriate and study its parts, are not processes Ayala Blanco sets in motion. Hence cinema can

be free of his criticism's grasp while simultaneously revealing something about itself through how it has spurred beautiful words.

With an eye toward placing Ayala Blanco's version of love for his inspiration, I will compare it to other conceptions of the muse in Mexican modernism: one from the above-mentioned José Juan Tablada, and the other from Efraín Huerta, whom Ayala Blanco considers a mentor. The shifts in attitude can be traced to a diversification of sources of epiphanies, as literature turned its gaze not just toward women, both divine and human, but also the city and cinema. A look at each era bears witness to the changing love for the muse of cinema, culminating in Ayala Blanco's urging of mutuality with his inspiration.

4.2.5.1 Songs of Chaste Love A stark indicator of the changing attitudes toward the muse in Latin American literary modernism is the inescapable Rubén Darío, (1867 – 1916), who makes perhaps the most telling statement of his vision of inspiration in the poem “*El cisne*” (“The Swan”).

Oh Swan! Oh sacred bird! If once white Helen,
Immortal princess of Beauty's realms, emerged
all grace from Leda's sky-blue egg, so now,
beneath the White of your wings, the new Poetry,
here in a splendor of music and light, conceives
the pure, eternal Helen who is the Ideal.¹⁴⁵

Several mythological figures in the poem make plain Darío's source. Leda was future Spartan queen Helen's mother, the result of a visit from Zeus in the form of a swan. In Jorge Camacho's reading, Darío pairs the violence of Zeus's sexual relations under deceptive shape-shifting with the creative act: “[i]n Darío's poem... the poet takes on the role of the ‘sacred’ swan, while the ‘new Poetry’ replaces Leda, the new lover of Zeus/the poet and the one who ‘conceives / the

¹⁴⁵ Rubén Darío, “The Swan” in *Selected Poems of Rubén Darío*, trans. Lysander Kemp (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 55.

pure and eternal Helen' who incarnates the ideal."¹⁴⁶ The writing of poetry becomes a sexual assault on a feminine inspiration. The rape of the muse produces a literary magnificence that is itself feminized as represented in Helen's legendary beauty.

For Camacho, "*El cisne*" shows two versions of modernism's vision of women. There's Helen, yet another "perverse icon of French modernism and the decadent movement in particular: the cold and distant beauty of the *femme fatale*,"¹⁴⁷ and Leda, a vessel that unwillingly enables male creation. The vision was part of an entrenched heteronormativity in the writing of several widely-read authors, who also made homophobic and misogynistic proclamations. Scholars like Sylvia Molloy and Oscar Montero have shed light on "the intolerance of some modernists, and their fear of transgression of societal norms and its potential national repercussions."¹⁴⁸ It was one of many instances of the contradictions of a literature that wanted to both transcend and fit in its time and place, to scandalize some bourgeois values and embrace others.

The heteronormativity was not alone among the tendencies of Latin American modernists. These authors would find other themes for their writings in a contemporaneous process: the rise of the modern Latin American city. In Mexico, the writers who subscribed to the *decadentista* movement (1893 – 1898), which for Juan Pascual Gay became the template for the country's subsequent avant-garde revolutions, attempted to capture in their writings the turn-of-the-century feel of life in Porfirio Diaz's unevenly developing Mexico City: "*Decadentismo* was the first completely modern artistic and literary movement in Mexico, and bohemianism the

¹⁴⁶ Jorge Camacho, "La violación de las musas: Rubén Darío, el modernismo y la sexualidad" in *Magazine Modernista* 14, February 15th, 2010, <http://magazinmodernista.com/2010/02/15/la-violacion-de-las-musas-ruben-dario-el-modernismo-y-la-sexualidad/> (accessed on March 2nd, 2014).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

expression of modernity, as it was a way to live the city.”¹⁴⁹ Shanik Sánchez explains Pascual Gay’s argument to further clarify that what distinguished *decadentismo* from other artists’ groups was not its set of aesthetic choices, but its emphasis on making their affective experience of urban change the fabric of their work. Choosing to inhabit city locations – the bar in particular – “became for the decadents a metonymy for art and literature.”¹⁵⁰ Taking the rhythms and feel of bohemian city life as a source for writing is not the creative process that emerges from a certain picture of feminine beauty. It draws ideas and methods from another kind of complexity, a mixture of fascination and profound dismay at the simultaneously expansive and restrictive possibilities of the *Porfiriato*’s positivist idea of progress. The muse became a sense of what could be termed the turn-of-the-century condition, which was, for Pascual Gay, “an enormous and extravagant mosaic festooned with different shapes, images, colors and textures that, despite their frequent disagreement and incompatibility, nevertheless come together in a contrast that decisively endows an improbable design with sense and unity.”¹⁵¹ Pascual Gay represents the *fin-de-siècle* environment with the mythological Chimera, a monstrous inspiration that, like Revueltas’s, was a montage of animal parts: a lion’s head, a snake for a tail, and a goat in the middle. More than a threat, the Chimera inspired with its absurd juxtapositions.

Among those under the Chimera’s queasy and exhilarating spell were Amado Nervo and, at *decadentismo*’s center, José Juan Tablada, both poets and later prolific chroniclers of the cinematograph. Tablada supplied a few examples of city-inspired poetry, like “*Nocturno alterno*” (“Alternating Nocturne”), in which the poet finds the metropolis equally entrancing and suffocating:

¹⁴⁹ Juan Pascual Gay, *El beso de la quimera. Una historia del decadentismo en México (1893-1898)* (San Luis Potosí: El Colegio de San Luis, 2012), 31.

¹⁵⁰ Shanik Sánchez, “Juan Pascual Gay. *El beso de la Quimera. Una historia del decadentismo en México (1893-1898)*” in *Valenciana* 6, no. 12 (July/December 2013): 217.

¹⁵¹ Pascual Gay, *El beso de la quimera*, 53.

Golden New York night,
cold limerdark walls,
Rector's, foxtrot, champagne
still houses, strong bars
and looking back,
above the silent roofs,
the spirit petrified,
 the white cats of the moon,
like Lot's wife.

And yet
 it is one,
at New York
 at Bogota
 and the same
 moon!¹⁵²

New York's beautiful "golden night" blankets "cold... walls... still houses... strong bars... silent roofs" and a "petrified" spirit not unlike that of Lot's tragic wife, who looked back at Sodom on the eve of its burning and was imprisoned in salt. The moon, identical in every other city, offers a respite, but Tablada matches the conflicted longing of Lot's wife for a town in chimerical decay. The moon might be the final focus of fascination, but the city stubbornly commands attention, tempting those trying to see beyond it to turn their heads and contemplate it. The poem itself looks back and forth in the layout of its lines, suggesting an indecisive gaze moving between the city and the moon, or between the cities themselves – an eye on New York, and another on Bogota. The city gravitationally affects the poem's very architecture.

The irruption of the city/Chimera suggests liberation of the muse from feminine personification. Yet with the arrival of cinema, the phantom lady (Faustine, the vampire, and the screen stars they represent) seems to have produced a new version of the ideal woman that inspires through her enigmatic allure. Something more complicated occurred to the ghostly muse in the cinematograph. A new kind of deity, more than a real human but less than a goddess, the

¹⁵² José Juan Tablada, "Alternating Nocturne" in *Anthology of Mexican Poetry*, ed. Octavio Paz, trans. Samuel Beckett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 160.

female star gave the male poet a new set of visions. Given her status, she was a different kind of muse. The Classical muse and the Renaissance muse, I argue, fuse in cinema: film-as-muse is both otherworldly and physical, ghostly yet tangible. It turns people of flesh and blood, like Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice, into spirits taken outside of their time and space. In an environment where inspiration was finding other streams from which to feed, cinema also stood to undo the exclusive femaleness of inspiration's sources. If human bodies captured on film and projected on a screen become phantoms, so does everything else – objects, places, landscapes and movements all occupy the same enchanting space. While Quiroga and Bioy Casares speak of spectral women, writers began dealing with the composite specter of the film frame, which prevents the signaling out of female screen bodies and establishes the entire image as a beguiling apparition. The former two writers made of the vampire and Faustine emissaries in the tradition of the psychopomp, or personified creatures with a connection to the afterlife. These fictions brought discrete, distinguishable characters into dramatic conflict, and thus isolated recorded women from their recorded environments so that they could interact with the male protagonists. The novels and stories about female phantoms not only enshrined an ideal of the film actress, but also allegorized their authors' love of cinema, making the ghost women stand, in large part, for the allure of the medium. When they wrote chronicles and were thus free from the demands of fiction, the writers started thinking of the film ghost as the totality of elements populating the screen. Changing periods in cinephile discourse, like the ones built around the concepts of *photogenie* and, later, *mise-en-scène*, do remark on the beauty and screen presence of actors, but find similar qualities elsewhere in the frame.¹⁵³ The shift from phantom women to phantom

¹⁵³ Two instances attest the reach of their attention to the elements of the image: Jean Epstein's description of the power of a telephone, among other items, on film, in his piece "Magnification" in Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism*, trans. Stuart Liebman, 235-240; and André Bazin's point that neorealism's innovation is to "deduce the ideas it unearths" from "the simple appearance of beings and of the world..." See "De Sica:

frames (to the ghostly totality of the film image) allows for the possibility of mitigating the fearful and tempting deification of feminine beauty.

The change does not occur because the way the film image captures female bodies runs counter to the impulse to idealize them – quite the opposite is very often the case. Film can and does frequently exacerbate the unattainability of female stars as objects of desire. Instead, chroniclers and cinephile critics would spread the foci of their obsession, so that something other than film stars was enshrined. The possibility opens for thinking about cinema's ghosts beyond sexualization, or to have a different conception of how the ghosts can receive the viewer's love through poetic expression. All of film, and not just its images of women, are ghosts and thus equally worthy of the writer's admiration.

Tablada in particular would put forth a devotion for the cinematograph that sketches a new poetic affection, and that invention of love for the cinematograph would find a partial echo in Ayala Blanco's criticism. During the cinematograph's early years, Tablada's work captured the notion that writing about film could be the poetry of the shadow world of the moving image, with the latter performing the function of a simultaneously deific and earthly muse. In the following October 16th, 1906 *crónica*, published in *El Imparcial*, Tablada made what might be his most passionate summation of what the cinematograph meant for him, one that doubles as an unusual call for attention to the then new technology – unusual because toward the end, its second-person interjections address the poet, the maker of words, as an audience that could particularly benefit from the spectacle. The chronicle, which I reproduce almost entirely, stacks images and prescient observations on film as it builds toward a moment that, if not exactly a

Metteur en Scène" in *What is cinema? Vol. II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 65.

summons to the typewriter, certainly demands something be said in the presence of film images.

As it will become clear, that something should also be beautiful:

From 6 a.m. on, do not ask anyone where they're going. Everyone is going to the same place... to the Cinematograph!... the dark hall in which, engrossed and cocooned, a mystical, ecstatic and fervent audience is initiated in the *helencianos* mysteries of the triumphant civilization... An imperious spell, an insuperable and fatal fascination, keeps every spectator in suspense and ecstasy... I have never seen anyone take their eyes off the projection canvas at one of those places of enchantment and wonder.

Meanwhile, all of life's simulacra, grotesque pantomimes of reality, or visual fictions from the *Blue* stories, astonishing events from the country of Jauja, entourages from *A Thousand and One Nights*, all of life, all dreams, all illusions, are there, in that place, mystical and somber like a catacomb. Exotic countries come closer, and every climate and landscape obeys the incantation and, once taken out of time and snatched from space, vibrate rapidly, before our eyes; "to see and to believe," said the skeptical apostle, and since everything can be seen, doubt is an aberration. Have faith and the mountain will come to you, said Christ, and the mountain, relieved of its enormous gravity, has come to us. And the most moving tragedies, the most ephemeral occurrences, become immortal and permanent. Life has been fixed, and that *fantomático* reflection, that humanity that gesticulates under the lunar glow of a different planet, of a dream world, of the kingdom of Wollo, is superior to life because it is multiple, because it doesn't perish in an instant, because it can be infinitely repeated. The landscape that astounds you, or the gesture and smile of a woman that captivates you, are there; you will see them whenever you want and as many times as you desire. Oh, the spell is deep and the seduction irresistible! The prodigious opium-induced dream is now within reach of all fortunes.

There is the smiling and omnipotent fairy for the baby who opens his eyes wide and believes in her; there are all the landscapes that you, reclusive dreamer, would never have laid eyes on! There is the idolized woman, the Circe that you, poet, would have never found amidst the ravenous longings and sumptuous chimeras that possess you! Yours is the grace contested among tycoons. It is yours, so calm yourself down, ruminate on your daydreams, let it macerate your soul with fascination. Wed under the full-moon brightness of that phantasmagoria, under the spectral light radiating from a dead star over that spectral land. And then, since there's nothing else you can do, chastely gorge yourself on realism. The Cinematograph is the Zola of the impossible.¹⁵⁴

So much about my current study coalesces in Tablada's chronicle that I will briefly underline a few telling fragments. Judging from the writing, Tablada is besotted with the cinematograph, and he shares many of his fellow chroniclers' enthusiasm. Film's reconfiguration of temporal and spatial understandings of the world sneaks into the chronicle. The mention of the poet occurs

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in González Casanova, *Por la pantalla*, 32.

between references to the eschatological and ghostly properties of the cinematograph (the projection room is “like a catacomb,” the light from the screen is “spectral”), once again linking inspiration with phantoms in film. And here appears a phenomenon germane to poetic criticism: the actual invention of new words for the purpose of describing cinema. The neologism, as exemplified in the above excerpt from his piece on *Blue Moon*, is one of Ayala Blanco’s most beloved devices, and Tablada’s chronicle has two, *helencianos* and *fantomático*. The former is, for González Casanova, a portmanteau of *helénico*, or Hellenic, and *anciano*, or old. *Fantomático*, meanwhile, composites *fantasía* (“from the Latin *phantasîa* or apparition, spectacle, image”) and *autómata* (“from the French *automate*, in turn derived from the Latin *automaton*: that which moves by itself”).¹⁵⁵ If Tablada transports an element of his poetry into his film writing, Ayala Blanco takes the neologism to make his film writing approach poetry. At the same time, the chronicle is an example of the romanticism and penchant for poetic imagery in Tablada that, for Octavio Paz, made him a “deserter” of the modernist movement.¹⁵⁶

For the purposes of suggesting a history of inspiration in film criticism, it is the final part of Tablada’s chronicle on which I want to linger. The sentences just before he names the cinematograph “the Zola of the impossible” hold an erotic mystery that implies a muse of the Renaissance kind. Is the poet the addressee of Tablada’s entire chronicle? Despite the late appearance of this specific character, the second-person-singular pronouns in the foregoing lines do not seem to add another subject, and the “dreamer” of the last paragraph could very well be the author himself (who, in this case, is undoubtedly male in Tablada’s resolutely heterosexual

¹⁵⁵ In addition to *fantomático* and *helenciano*, González Casanova locates a third neologism in the word “Wollo,” which he quotes as “Wello” in the original chronicle. I have translated it as “Wollo” here because I disagree with González Casanova’s reading of the word. He interprets it as a variation on the English expression “well-off.” I believe it actually refers to the province of Wollo in Ethiopia, which would be consistent with Tablada’s talk of how the cinematograph makes “exotic countries come closer.” Wollo has also been spelled as “Wello” in English. Its origins as a word in the abugida of Amharic, the Semitic language spoken in Ethiopia, may explain the different spellings.

¹⁵⁶ Octavio Paz, “Introduction to the History of Mexican Poetry” in *Anthology of Mexican Poetry*, 36.

vision; he searches for his “idolized woman”). The poet appears as someone in hungry pursuit of the world’s wonders – he must calm himself down – who is also besieged by insecurities brought about, perhaps, by the limitations of his talent and creativity. As a result, he is “reclusive.” The cinematograph allows him to overcome those limitations, bringing to him the dreams that would otherwise escape him. In doing so, they also provide him with an excellent atmosphere for a very specific ritual: a wedding. Exhorting the poet to marry – to whom does not seem to matter, which undermines the centrality of the human muse – under the screen’s glow requires him to pronounce a declaration of romantic commitment before the cinematograph, a task of inventive wordsmithing that the fantastic setting (the phantasmagoria) should enable. The cinematograph inspires the poet to utter marriage vows, which are, commonly, words of love. Composing those vows would conceivably be well within his powers, but the task receives renovated impetus in the presence of the moving image.

Yet once the marriage takes place, Tablada says “there’s nothing else [the poet] can do” but “chastely gorge [him]self on realism.” Remarking on the chastity of the encounter with the cinematograph’s images implies a relationship with them exists or is at least wanted, and that it is driven, partly, by desire. Tablada might not name the poet’s betrothed because the marriage that occurs under the cinematograph’s light also hopes to act upon a longing for the moving image. A sort of double wedding happens, in which the poet simultaneously declares his love for his human bride and for the screen. Because the longing for the latter cannot be carnally fulfilled, chastity forces love to be verbally conveyed. Having done just that in his chronicle, it seems clear the poet to whom Tablada speaks is himself, wishing to come to terms with the new chances for the development of his poetic inspiration that the cinematograph affords him.

4.2.5.2 Loving Imperfection: the Flawed Stimulation of the City and Cinema

The cinematograph activated a chaste love for a phantom-like female figure in Tablada's chronicles, which co-existed with an interest in losing oneself in the vertigo of the urban landscape. In later decades of the twentieth century, a writer would bring, to both cinema and the city, a pronounced eroticism, coupled with a philosophy of love and desire that places them in "an intellectual game that consists of proximity and distance, embrace and abandonment, participating and waiting, affection and indifference, consummation and sexual tension." Mexican author Efraín Huerta (1914-1982) was a poet and a journalist, and it can be argued that Ayala Blanco looked in Huerta's work for ways to combine the two disciplines. From Huerta's poetry, he takes an understanding of inspiration outside of a desired, ideal woman; from Huerta's chronicles, he borrows a sense of film's social engagement. The author himself establishes his development: "the biggest influence in my film criticism is poet Efraín Huerta."¹⁵⁷ To further explain Ayala Blanco's fusion of poetry and journalism, I will first briefly describe how reading Huerta bridges Tablada and Ayala Blanco's conceptions of film's muse-like position by complicating his love for cinema. In place of idealization, Huerta applied an apprehensive form of care for the medium, a love that could also be the source of anger when film gives the writer cause for concern. He thus opens the relationship between the critic and the medium to a wider variety of feelings that could inspire writing.

Generationally, Huerta stands between Tablada and Ayala Blanco, and in two important instances, he represents both a break with and a continuation of the *decadentista* project: a break with the mannered, elaborate diction of decadent poetry, and a continuation of a tempestuous love affair with the city. Huerta makes the intensity of the relationship plain in two important pieces about his hometown of Mexico City: "*Declaración de amor*" ("Declaration of Love") and

¹⁵⁷ In Mónica Maristain, "El cine me hace delirar: Jorge Ayala Blanco."

“*Declaración de odio*” (“Declaration of Hate”). Huerta’s poems to the Mexican capital reject the lyricism of Tablada’s *Nocturno alterno*, and substitute anti-rhetorical directness in concert with a larger poetic project that intended to depart from classical notions of taste and allusion. While Tablada and Huerta both disparage the aesthetic and moral values of the bourgeoisie, the latter belongs to a vanguard even more determined to shed romantic visions of art and poetry.¹⁵⁸ His view of Mexico City is gritty, uncompromising, and in need of balance through the writing of two poems expressing the opposing and complementary emotions of love and hate. In “*Declaración de amor*,” Huerta visualizes a Mexico City of beautiful ruins, which is “sad as a tear,” has “eyes / of volcanic stone and granite” and streets full of people who walk “like a shadow or like mist.”¹⁵⁹ The poet also articulates another variation on the femininity of the muse, finding in the city not a lover, but a maternal figure. On the surface, Huerta’s feminization of Mexico City is straightforward, but the distinction he makes between those two versions of femininity is tellingly diffuse in the following passage.

I think about my woman:
about her smile when she sleeps
as a mysterious light shields her,
about her curious eyes when the day
is round marble.
I think about her, city,
and about our future:
about the child, about the ear of corn,
or even about the grain of wheat
that will also be yours,
because it’s made of your blood,
of your murmuring,
of your big heart of stone and air,

¹⁵⁸ Huerta’s work has been associated with *antipoesía*, an attitude that had in Chilean author Nicanor Parra its most quoted representative. *Antipoesía* nurtured a more prosaic, colloquial and conversational poetry, and Huerta’s work certainly featured shades of that approach. He even referred to himself as an “*antipoeta*.” The label, however, might be misleading if one limits Huerta’s work to that single tendency (just as it is to think of Tablada only as a *decadentista*). See Huerta, *El gran cocodrilo en treinta poemínimos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014).

¹⁵⁹ Efraín Huerta, “Declaration of Love” in *500,000 Azaleas. The Selected Poems of Efraín Huerta*, trans. Jim Norrington (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Books, 2001), 165.

of our cool or lukewarm
or burning or frozen thoughts,
humilities and pride, my city...¹⁶⁰

The maternal does take over, for even the poet's wife inspires not desire, but longing for offspring. The dual origin of that offspring, a product of wife and town, makes the city-as-mother also city-as-lover. Accordingly, the city has a female body in the poem, albeit more vaguely than a linear equivalence between anatomy and architecture. The parts of the city's body are buildings and weather. Rather than finding female shapes in the cityscape and only rendering it in anthropomorphic terms, Huerta also describes the city as a living organism with its own, non-human contours. It is another instance of the poet's eye turning ever so subtly (but not completely) away from an ideal woman and toward environments and objects:

My great Mexico City:
the depth of your sex is a breeding ground
for bright strengths;
your winter is a lure
of pin money and milk;
your enormous smokestacks
fingers spewing fog;
your axial gardens the only truth...¹⁶¹

Smokestacks, gardens, and winter, the city's features, enter the realm of poetry, but stay sensually mundane. The concern with the quotidian and the real transforms into castigation in "*Declaración de odio*." A politically active writer, Huerta critiques here an inconsequential, onanistic intellectual class, an apparent loss of a protective and strong masculinity, and an increasing cultural poverty (of which the pervasiveness of American cinema is partially responsible) in the Mexican capital. The rhetoric is paternalistic, misogynistic and homophobic, resting on the hope that the city will outgrow her "candor of a disrobed virgin" so that her

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 169, 171.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 171. This version translates "*tus jardines axilas*" as "your axial gardens." A more accurate translation would be "your gardens are underarms," which maintains the stanza's theme of listing the city's body parts.

inhabitants can be “at last men / in a different world.”¹⁶² In the end, the hate is really an expression of an undying love that would eventually nurture the city toward progress:

We declare to you our hate, magnificent city.
To you, to your sad and vulgar bourgeoisie,
to your girls of air, caramels, and American films,
to your ice cream black pudding youths of garbage,
to your licentious queers who devastate
the schools, the Garibaldi Plaza
the living and venomous street of San Juan de Letrán.

We declare to you our hate perfected by force of feeling it¹⁶³
each day more immense...

...

There are hidden over there, surprised, perhaps
masturbating,
a few dozen cowards, children of theory,
of envy and chaos, youth of the “practical sense of life”
ruins abandoned to their own orgasms,
vile children without form mumbling their tedium,
speculating about books foreign to our own.
To our own, city, that which belongs to us!
What pours happiness and makes jubilations flower,
laughs, laughs of enjoyment from some hungry mouths,
hungry from work,
from proud work of being at last men
in a different world.¹⁶⁴

The multilayered relationship with the city, one that allows love but prevents idealization, dovetails with a concern with lucidity and the real – the city can seem like an ideal, but Huerta often displaces its wonders with its flaws. Not only does the inclusion of hate in the possible feelings for the city opens more avenues for inspiration, but it also sets the task of the poet on a socially committed course. The still patriarchal and heterosexual vision of the muse accompanies

¹⁶² Efraín Huerta, “Declaration of Hate” in *Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Stephen Tapscott, trans. Todd Dampier (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 245.

¹⁶³ Ibid. The translation should read “perfected by force of feeling you [*sentirte*] each day more immense.” It is the city that the poem feels expanding, not the hatred.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Another mistranslation: the final three lines quoted read “*hambrientas de trabajo / de trabajo y orgullo de ser al fin varones / en un mundo distinto*,” which translates as “hungry for work, / for work and for the pride of being at last men / in a different world.”

a concern with the city's prosperity. Even if Huerta continues to speak of inspiration in heteronormative erotic terms, he also finds it in the imperfect experience of living among Mexico City's architecture and people. The muse is no longer only an object of desire by turns unattainable and vulnerable to desecration. It (rather than "she") becomes a social fault, a perfectible situation, or a condition the poet hopes to change. His poetry would spring not just from awe and love, but from anger as well.

Huerta saw in cinema a similar calling. In a 1938 article, he explains film's inescapability makes attending the theater an obligation toward fellow humans. "It cannot be denied that its fortunate irruption into all aspects of life has made cinema the world's indispensable axis..." Therefore, "going to the theater rarely or not at all is a crime of injured humanity."¹⁶⁵ The reason for its success and for its very existence, Huerta says, is its blend of composed beauty and harsh truth. "Can one avoid... a film showing in which we see ourselves nakedly reflected, just as we would not want to be in daily life? Isn't film, an apparent prodigy of falsehood and deception – that is, of poetry – the essence of the surprising and vital? Isn't film our sometimes damning, sometimes absolving, always faithful and loyal shadow?"¹⁶⁶ Huerta's rhetorical questions call back Quiroga's insight that cinema lets reality become its own poetry, or that film shows that reality is always already poetic. As much as film relies on illusion and manipulation in its plastic and narrative qualities, it finally remits to at least an inkling of the world's image in all its accidental, uncontrollable quality.

The alignment of poetry with deception and falsehood, and of cinema with both, provides Huerta with an argument for a type of poetic activity he favored: *poesía impura*, or "impure poetry." His demand for regular theatrical attendance is a response to a claim Huerta ascribes to

¹⁶⁵ Efraín Huerta, *El otro Efraín. Antología prosística* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014), Kindle Book.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Paul Valéry: “I rarely go to the cinema.”¹⁶⁷ Valéry’s poetry, like his contemporary Mallarmé’s, has in Huerta’s eyes a self-consciousness and order that made its beauty hermetic, its urge to ferociously be purely language a detachment from the world – Valéry represents pure poetry. Impure poetry (a concept credited to Pablo Neruda) gives Huerta a much more enticing option, for the impurity comes from the poet giving into the irresistible pull of unruly, disordered life over the potential perfection of words. Film itself, in Huerta’s view, is the maximum expression of impure poetry, because it consists of high-fidelity recordings of the world and is thus tied to all of its virtue, viciousness and materiality. Sharing Revueltas’s notion, Huerta thinks of poetry, not drama or painting, as cinema’s predecessor: “without impure poetry,” he says, “cinema would not exist as an art form”¹⁶⁸ (the reader will recall that Ayala Blanco also called cinema an impure object). Cinema came to fulfill impure poetry’s social function. One cannot avoid going to the theater, Huerta argues, because it shows us “nakedly” what we do *not* want to be. Film makes poetry out of the world’s substance, and points the way toward becoming something else if the present state is unsatisfactory. Writing about it meant writing about something that, like the city, was by turns despicable, dreadful and movingly striking, worthy of inspiring both love and hate (however misguided these feelings could be). Huerta thought film criticism worked through “scolds” (“*regaños*”), which are the product of loving disappointment. Guided by imperfection, inspiration could shed idealization as a condition for its possibility.

A double transition took place in the film consciousness of these Mexican writers: cinema went from ideal wonder to flawed art form, and the affection it inspired became more markedly anxious. Carlos Ulises Mata observes the change between two sets of film chroniclers

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. Huerta gives Valéry authorship of those words, but provides no source. Valéry did, however, say that cinema “exasperated” him because it made “the false out of the true.” It is also noteworthy that Valéry himself had a crisis of faith in his poetic work and the idea of poetry for its own sake. Eventually, he too sought connection with the human. See Paul Valéry, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957-1960), 220.

¹⁶⁸ Huerta, *El otro Efraín*, Kindle book.

and critics. Writers of Huerta's generation, which includes José Revueltas, adopted "a position toward film more colored by social implications and transcendental visions than the more hedonistic approach of intellectuals of previous generations," like *Fósforo* authors Alfonso Reyes and Martín Luis Guzmán.¹⁶⁹ But even if writers like Revueltas and Huerta did not foreground desire in their appreciation, they still found in cinema something unquestionably admirable: "Huerta never interrogated or put in doubt cinema's placement under the category of art, and for him it was an equal among other expressive forms."¹⁷⁰ Film writing, at this point, had moved past the question of cinema's artistic legitimacy. Huerta's love of cinema, if not "hedonistic," was certainly unconditional. Film and the city could be loved for their greatness and hated for their (perceived) inadequacies, but they are reliable presences, always there for the writer, from which the impetus to write could begin. Despite exhibiting a certain bigotry, Huerta is at the threshold of a more layered kind of love, one that had made gestures toward thinking outside the eroticism of female sexuality, and its submission, to exalt the energy that puts writing in motion. The new relationship to cinema could cover more of the spectrum of love, and perhaps arrange itself in the Faulknerian configuration of "you don't love because, you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults."¹⁷¹ Women and sexual minorities are, of course, not faults. What matters is that faults are allowed in the first place.

4.2.5.3 The Romantic Intimacy of Poetic Criticism Ayala Blanco's criticism is the climax of a process of veneration of film that began with Tablada's modest love letter to the cinematograph. Tablada's chronicle represented a major early step in Mexican film criticism toward putting cinema in the company of the muses. On its way to that pantheon, the moving

¹⁶⁹ Carlos Ulises Mata, "El otro, el mismo: Efraín Huerta en su prosa" in *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ William Faulkner, "Mississippi" in *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 2004), 43.

image would also witness a shift in attitudes toward literary creativity. Comparing the travails of the inspiring figure, from deity to idealized woman to threatened woman to city to ghostly automaton, evinces a transformation in the quality of the feelings the writers expressed toward their muses: courtly love, unchecked desire, ambivalence. What Ayala Blanco's willingness to co-compose with cinema contributes to this history is romantic intimacy, an environment where the partners retain an inner life and express their love not through complete mutual knowledge, but through interactions with the other's unknowability – in other words, with the substance of creative dialogue.

Nancy Yousef explores the notion of romantic intimacy to counteract what she calls “the ideal of mutuality.” Sharing Levinas's desire to preserve otherness in human relationships, Yousef argues that for successful, ethical intimacy to occur, the parties must share knowledge of each other but also be able to keep something only to themselves. The word intimacy “designates, and thus to a degree attests to, a confidence that individuals can and do disclose to one another thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but it also pertains to, and thus intimates the foreboding or wish for, an inward region of irreducible privacy, a fated or perhaps willed withholding.”¹⁷² The assumption Yousef hopes to dismantle says that perfect symmetry in relationships is necessary to connect with fellow humans – that what people know about one another should match. The alternative is asymmetry and, in the case of film criticism, that means maintaining a proximity to film that runs up against the mystery that fuels rhapsody. Above, I offered that Ayala Blanco's poetic approach takes flight from cinema and preserves its integrity, the state at which it is most tantalizing and most stimulating for his words. Having achieved that, cinema remains equally alluring and enigmatic for those reading his work, which in turn can have its own strange, inspiring beauty. In this understanding of poetic film criticism, it's as if the

¹⁷² Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1.

writing respects its muse's inner life and existence in the world, so that the muse is free to respond to criticism by disagreeing with it, and criticism arrives with full knowledge of this potential failure. That keeps the conversation asymmetrical, but also in perpetual search for new avenues of engagement, and thus promotes the reinvention of the relationship between the critic and film, demanding attention and effort in maintaining it.

An intimate romance with cinema demands the poetic critic listen to film for material to play, to exalt her happiness at being able to exchange thoughts with film. The configuration of which I'm put in mind is reminiscent of written expressions of love that predate Dante and Petrarch. It hearkens back to how the woman named Heloise conceived of her relationship with twelfth century philosopher Peter Abelard after the latter's castration, his urging her to take her religious vows, and his own entrance to the clergy. Denied not just her beloved's proximity, but also many other kinds of erotic experience, Heloise insisted that she and Abelard play the games of love through their letters. They would continue their relationship in writing. But, like Tablada's idea that the poet write words of love to the cinematograph – like marriage vows, words conveying some form of passion and beauty – Heloise asks for a certain kind of words from her lover, as she emphatically indicates in the letter she sent to establish their storied correspondence. Her description of what those letters, and the act of letter-writing in their situation, mean for her, gives a good framework to think about the desire in Ayala Blanco's poetic criticism for a dialogue that does not have the immediate, message-response patterns of speech, but instead relies on each participant's imaginative personal contributions – that is, each participant must be a creator on its own. Heloise wants to co-compose with Abelard their epistolary romance.

The letters, like Tablada's gorging oneself in the cinematograph's realism, would be a chaste endeavor, a consolation for Heloise's "forbidd[ing] [her]self all pleasure" by entering religion at his behest.¹⁷³ Their monastic life made their interactions necessarily abstinent – as with Tablada, "there is nothing left to do" for the poet/lover but express an immaculate hunger. But that chastity, a substitute to their then impossible physical proximity, is in itself a consummation, an active acknowledgement and nurturing of their feelings – a thinking-in-action, as it were, indistinguishable in its provenance from other erotic (creative) activities. Heloise demands that Abelard's letters provide "love for love, little for much, words for deeds."¹⁷⁴ More forcefully than Tablada, and prefiguring Ayala Blanco's path, Heloise determines the declarations of love in the writing should be the product of imagination and intuition. Even though Heloise points out Abelard's undeniable fame came from his philosophical and scholarly work, she reminds him that his erotic appeal stemmed from "the arts of making songs and of singing them," arts "that philosophers have seldom followed." In his songs, Abelard shows a side of himself where love inspires creation: "as with a game, refreshing the labor of philosophic exercise, thou hast left many songs composed in amatory measure or rhythm, which for the suavity both of words and of tune being oft repeated, have kept thy name without ceasing on the lips of all."¹⁷⁵ Hoping to convince him to write her love letters full of the same quality, Heloise quotes love-inspired realizations to separate philosophy from wisdom, the latter a source of deeper and farther-reaching insights. "Wisdom" is the status she designates to Aspasia's advice to Xenophon and his wife in a dialogue by Aeschines Socraticus:

After [Aspasia] had propounded [her] argument for their reconciliation, she concluded as follows: "For when ye have understood this, that there is not a better man nor a happier

¹⁷³ Peter Abelard and Heloise, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), 60.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

woman on the face of the earth; then ye will ever and above all things seek that which ye think the best; thou to be the husband of so excellent a wife, and she to be married to so excellent a husband.” A blessed sentiment, assuredly, and more than philosophic, expressing wisdom itself rather than philosophy.¹⁷⁶

In her desire for Abelard’s letters to “restore to [her] [his] presence,”¹⁷⁷ Heloise wanted him to become more poet than philosopher, and his letters to be songs of feeling rather than his more famous displays of knowledge. She praises his love songs not for their erudition or rigor, but for the “sweetness of [their] melodies” which did not let “even illiterates... forget [him].”¹⁷⁸ The letter makes a case for how the wisdom of emotion cuts through semantics to find avenues of communication beyond the correctness of language. Tablada’s poet – that is, himself – might have obeyed the same urge to write from emotion when he composed his chronicle, which reads at times like a song as concerned with sound as with meaning. Ayala Blanco’s pieces certainly share that concern. Besides the eager accumulation of imagery, they insert neologisms, as if there were no words available to describe some of their discoveries. While neologisms are often created with semantics in mind (Tablada and Ayala Blanco’s coinages definitely depend on their etymologies), they are also poetic solutions untroubled by language correctness. Since the defense of those solutions is couched in Heloise’s customarily profound literary scholarship, they do not make an argument against intellectualism, but one for an inclusive expansion of its possibilities. The musical and poetic choices are examples of verbal playfulness more akin to songwriting than exposition.

One can think of Ayala Blanco putting himself in Abelard’s position and correcting the latter’s correspondence. Instead of writing treatises to his beloved, like Abelard did to Heloise’s disappointment, Ayala Blanco prefers sending love letters to his dear cinema. And if every piece

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 59.

is like a love letter, it is capable of the excesses and absences brought about by longing and distance. In other words, it more openly displays an awareness that it may be misunderstood, overwrought, underwhelming or callous, while hoping – but only hoping, rather than expecting – that the receiver interprets its message properly. But then again, it may not. Molina describes a revised relationship with a muse that eliminates the imposition of an artist’s expectations. The work “is a knowledge that the muse must accept or reject, since not even the smallest obligation exists for both parties. One offers his knowledge, the other... can allow herself to be seduced, or not, or even unmask the interlocutor.”¹⁷⁹ Comfortable with the danger of being “unmasked” – that is, of being proven wrong – the poetic critic chooses to openly recognize that he is largely creating his own subject, speaking primarily of his own love and his image of its receiver, rather than claiming to capture something it does not and cannot own. And that lets his work take off. It liberates itself by making no demands on cinema other than continued creation. As Molina puts it in a rereading of Dante’s own history with Beatrice:

Why turn a woman into an active muse when she does not want to be one? A woman will never be forced into being a muse. It is precisely her who becomes an active subject when she influences a man. The situation grows difficult, complex and at times unsolvable when a muse-woman enters reality... [Dante writes of a] woman, probably non-existent, materialized only with the goal of inspiring him. Without this subterfuge, the poet might not have reached his artistic peak.¹⁸⁰

Inspiration is, in other words, an invention pushing the writing to grow. Ayala Blanco’s poetic criticism, in approximating cinema by becoming an aesthetic experience and consummating its love through creative discourse, also learns about itself, which might produce writing of a quality inaccessible if it were after transparency and critical analysis first and literary aesthetics second. It is a risky, vulnerable take on criticism that takes Adrian Martin’s “all-or-nothing” challenge to an extreme. Except that when the outcome points to what would be a mismatch between the

¹⁷⁹ Molina, “*La academia de las musas*,” 81.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

criticism and its co-composer, what is left behind is a text that moves for its craft, for how it bears witness to an experience striking enough to warrant writing that aspires to beauty. Calling it a “failure” in terms of description would constitute a humble irony.

5.0 CODA: POETRY WITHIN EVERYONE'S REACH

5.1 POETIC INVESTIGATIONS AND THE MEDIA STUDIES CLASSROOM

The introduction claimed that Mexican poetic investigations enact processes through which film writing deals with the contradictions of globalization. Among their capacities to negotiate those contradictions are their preference of liberation over mastery of the subject, which maintains an awareness of the contingency of power distribution in knowledge production; the stated transience and nomadism of the writers and their writings, which express longing and ambivalence for a cinema that is both powerfully present and distant; and their advancement of *translatio*, not only between words and images (in the form of imperfect ekphrasis), but also in drawing attention to writing that resists more literal translation if the target language wishes to preserve some of the musicality and texture of the source language. Since the work of poetic investigations reacts to the visionary attributes of the moving image, it always seeks to meet the reader on an openly imaginary and imaginative plane, boosting and taking advantage of the improvisational demands of communication. That poetic spirit binds together the writers in my study, and runs through an important part of the history of Mexican film thought in the first century of the medium.

I have been open about the translation problems (both linguistic and disciplinary) of bringing poetic investigations under an academic roof, and about the fact that this study does not solve them as much as navigate them within the North American discipline's discourse. It is

therefore an appeal for attention based on the belief that the academy contains a place where many facets of cinematic inquiry, experimental forms of writing and diverse cultural histories can be freely introduced: the classroom. Complementing and attenuating the instrumental learning that happens in film courses, poetic investigations can exercise inventiveness. Pursuing the established scholarship and pedagogy in cinema studies does not also mean eliminating an element of playfulness that demonstrates the value of judgment and the ability to create and improvise. The examples of poetic investigations from Ayala Blanco, Revueltas, Elizondo, Bonifant and others are gateways for students into interdisciplinarity, the processes of theory-making and knowledge production, and the differing contexts in which cinema is not just made, but also studied and appreciated. I operate under the notion that the classroom remains a learning laboratory, where students can often engage in highly speculative exchanges and be exposed to ideas without concerns of their direct “usefulness” or relevance to eventual career plans. One of my, in my view, modest goals here has been asking for a place for Mexican poetic investigations in classrooms inclined to spend some of their sessions exploding utilitarian structures to tease out some of the world’s possibilities.

This is not just a call for North American and European cinema studies – it goes to Mexican scholars as well. Advocacy for a clear humanistic intent to accompany cinematic education in Mexico seems necessary now that the field is, in some ways, in its early stages. Lauro Zavala, who directs one of Mexico’s few graduate programs in film history, theory and criticism, has been at the forefront of establishing cinema studies as a discipline in the country. His curricula combine history, grand theory, post-theory, and cultural studies to eventually concentrate on at least fifteen different methods of film inquiry, which include “morphological analysis,” “intertextual analysis,” “structural analysis,” “genre analysis” and “rhetorical

analysis.”¹ Zavala has called the idea of a Mexican cinema studies “a field under construction,”² by which he means the field will be constructed once it has been instituted throughout a considerable bulk of Mexican universities. If the viability and presence of an academic field is measured by the number of programs, departments and degrees that bear its name, then Zavala and those working toward the same goal have an opportunity to begin from premises that are different from the North American and European versions of cinema studies. And Zavala does have an eye on what those premises should be. His assessment of the state of cinema studies in Latin America tells him it is already displaying some tendencies that he would like to see tempered:

In the study of film history, textual approaches (Gubern o García Riera) have dominated over intertextual ones (Allen and Gomery). In the study of film language, the research of formal elements (Bordwell-Thompson) has dominated over the elaboration of *découpage* (Faulstich and Korte). In the study of the relationship between film and literature, adaptation theory (and the problem of fidelity) still dominates over intersemiotic translation (and the recognition of cinema’s aesthetic autonomy *vis-à-vis* literature).

In short, it appears that the dominant attitude continues to be the use of cinema for disciplinary, didactic and production-oriented purposes – like the training of industry professionals – rather than interpretation and analysis from an aesthetic or interdisciplinary perspective. In other words, cinema studies in Latin America respond to film more as a cultural industry than as an art form (which is often confined to film schools and a few graduate programs).³

Zavala presents his observations matter-of-factly, without necessarily taking a position on the matter of the dominance of didacticism over interpretation and analysis. What he sees is an imbalance that obscures the humanistic conception of cinema that the poetic investigation shares: that cinema is aesthetically autonomous and a source of ideas, or that it exists in the world with the ability to rearrange knowledge through phenomenal experiences. When audiences describe

¹ Lauro Zavala., *Módulo de cine. Notas de Curso* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011), 3

² Zavala, “Los estudios sobre cine en México: Un terreno en construcción” in *Teorías y prácticas audiovisuales. Actas del primer Congreso Internacional de la Asociación Argentina de Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual*, eds. Marina Mognillansky, Andrea Molfetta, Miguel A. Santagada (Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2010), 49

³ Zavala, *Módulo de cine*, 109.

those experiences in writing, new languages and unique propositions can break out in poetic form. A key point is his comparison between the “research of formal elements” that he associates with Bordwell and Thompson, and what he calls the “elaboration of *découpage*,” which he ties to scholars Werner Faulstich and Helmut Korte. The latter two are interested in “narrative structure,” understood as the arrangement of shapes, movements and action beyond story and plot. The “elaboration of *découpage*” is then the holistic account of each formal and storytelling choice seen in combination in each particular instance. For Zavala, Faulstich and Korte’s “logic consists of proposing a different method of analysis for each film and a particular objective for each particular analysis.” Or, more plainly put, “there are a hundred methods to analyze a hundred films,”⁴ a notion reminiscent of Ayala Blanco’s conceptual prolixity. Rather than collecting recurring techniques, every film presents, in the combination of its qualities, a singular case. A film demands the invention of its own analysis. Paired with cinema’s autonomy and the concept of “intersemiotic translation,” which includes ekphrasis, Zavala hints at a situation for cinema studies to which poetic investigations can respond with their experimentation with individual experiences, word-image interactions, and the constant awareness of the sheer presence of motion pictures. The strategies of the writers in my study can help increase the influence of aesthetic and interdisciplinary goals and reduce the dominance of what Zavala calls “disciplinary purposes.”

Zavala wrote the remarks about what approaches dominated Latin American cinema studies in 2011. A year later, he would say something different about the region’s prevailing culture of film analysis. He first states that “the most solid tradition” of film analysis during the twentieth century in the region is “historiographic and political interpretation.” In the introduction, I noted that it is precisely the socially engaged theories of Third Cinema that come

⁴ Zavala, “Tradiciones metodológicas en el análisis cinematográfico” in *La Colmena*, 74 (2012): 14.

to mind when the Euro-American field thinks of Latin American film thought. Zavala implies the prevalence of those theories justify that perception. But things changed in 2012: “Perhaps the analysis philosophy of the Mediterranean School is what has been adopted in Latin America. As defined by Casetti and Di Chio, the Mediterranean analyst is like a chef who must choose the methodological ingredients most adequate for her own individual recipe, which would result from her experience, her interests and her objectives.”⁵ What Zavala calls “the Mediterranean School” (because he locates it in work from Italian and Spanish scholars) has “a tendency to integrate and balance the virtues of other currents of film analysis, whether to multiply successive approaches to reading a film – which, in turn, promotes comparative work [...] – or to didactically make explicit the necessary processes for all analysis.”⁶ If in his 2011 writing, what dominated was a disciplinarily isolated interest in cinema’s industrial qualities, by 2012 he described the state of the field in a more conciliatory, synthesizing note, where critics and researchers look at films and their goals and decide which of the available methodologies, or which mixture of them, better suit their needs.

Delving into the difference between those two visions of Latin American film studies is less interesting than what they say cumulatively, and the fact that in both cases, Zavala reaches the same conclusions: first, that there are no theoretical approaches with universal reach coming from Latin America. From the two texts, it transpires that he believes this is partly because schools pedagogically favor instruction over discovery, and partly because the historiographic-political tradition had been stronger. He mentions Latin American theorists that deserve international recognition, like Lisa Block de Béhar in Uruguay, Ismail Xavier and Arlindo

⁵ Zavala, “Tradiciones metodológicas en el análisis cinematográfico,” 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

Machado in Brazil and Ángel Faretta in Argentina.⁷ The second conclusion is that whatever conditions evolved into the current situation of Latin American cinema studies, what he hopes to see is an ethos of film writing in which “each argument is a creative work, the product of intellectual imagination and discipline and, therefore, of ethical and aesthetic commitments.”⁸ The Mediterranean School, and even Faulstich and Korte’s “German School” with its belief that the uniqueness of each work of film yields unique readings, would foment that philosophy.

Poetic investigations put critics in this very mindset. The instances here collected show commitments to solidarity, witnessing, liberty and futurity, to asking in what unexpected journeys cinema might take the viewer, and to write something striking for the reader – something that is informative and revealing, but also, and more importantly, fascinating apart from its explanatory relationship to a work of the moving image. And if indeed Latin American scholars are largely choosing from an extensive catalogue of methodologies to inventively personalize their insights, then the ground is set to further acknowledge the rich tradition of poetic investigations and include it in the project of developing the field in the region. Given how many important texts have been written in this mode throughout the history of Latin American film culture, there is plenty of material for Spanish-language professors. The twin efforts of increasing interest in Euro-American universities through translations and historical studies, and the embrace by Latin American academies of the strategies of poetry and fiction to enhance the creativity of their film analyses, could then produce work from which scholars and students everywhere can learn.

There are, however, questions left about what happens to poetic investigations outside cinema (in the terrain’s of other screen media) and outside the academy.

⁷ Zavala, *Módulo de Cine*, 109.

⁸ Zavala, “Tradiciones metodológicas en el análisis cinematográfico,” 15.

5.2 POETIC INVESTIGATIONS AND SCREEN MEDIA

I would like to address those questions with an example that speaks to another consequence of globalization: how poetic investigations adapt to the uneasy shift from film to media. The poetic investigations gathered in these pages all deal with cinema only, and no matter how much purchase film still has in the audience's imagination, the future of poetic inquiry must wrestle with the changing media landscape. This example, which involves a key moment in the molding of Mexican cinema in the twenty-first century, also sees cinema in dialogue with television and digital video.

There is a scene in the middle of *Amores perros* (2000) where Octavio (Gael García Bernal) and Jorge (Humberto Busto) get ready to attend a fateful dog fight. They are in Octavio's bedroom, and the television is on. Contrasting Octavio's focus on counting their money is Jorge's awareness of the television, which he watches with the inattention that is perhaps the medium's paradigmatic viewing method. Jorge tunes into the show just as casually as he tunes out when the two exit the room, leaving the television on. The camera lingers on a wide shot of the empty room, the small screen just slightly off-center against a cluttered wall. The next shot is a close-up of the television screen, where a talk show interview unfolds. Director and editor Alejandro González Iñárritu and his co-editors Luis Carballar and Fernando Pérez Unda introduce the second narrative in their triptych – the relationship between model Valeria (Goya Toledo) and magazine editor Daniel (Álvaro Guerrero) – through the television screen: Valeria happens to be the talk show's interviewee. Once the broadcast ends, the film follows Valeria outside the studio and onto her heartbreaking tale.

It is not an uncommon transition in fiction film and television – Iñárritu himself has returned to it in a scene in *Birdman* by having the camera seemingly penetrate a television screen

in a complex, digitally-enhanced tracking shot. What makes the transition stand out in *Amores perros* when compared to the later one in *Birdman* is how the differences between them reflect the two stylistic modes of the director's filmmaking so far. *Amores perros* started his feature film career and announced his period of achronologically edited mosaic narratives written by author Guillermo Arriaga: *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) also form part of this cycle. After the transitional film *Beautiful* (2010), which followed one character instead of many, was his first not scripted by Arriaga, and maintained his reliance on multiple cuts, *Birdman* begins what appears to be the current stage, where Iñárritu favors long takes, both real and fabricated, over cutting. This line continued in *The Revenant* (2015) and the virtual reality project *Carne y arena* (2017), where viewers enter a room filled with sand and wear headsets where a dangerous border crossing from Mexico to the United States plays out, each participant taking the role of a migrant (I include it in this period for its recreation of a continuous gaze to match the visual experience of a person walking through the desert between Mexico and the US). The television screen transitions happen accordingly in their respective films: in *Amores perros*, it occurs through a jump cut, from the wide shot to the close-up. In *Birdman*, a cut is disguised to make it possible for the frame-crossing to appear like a seamless camera movement.

A frame-within-a-frame composition might more often than not suggest a passage of the gaze *into* what is in the smaller frame, a forward movement of immersion in the image, just like the one represented in *Birdman*. The impression the scene leaves behind is that the screen is a window into a world that can be occupied (the same sensation results with the reverse of that movement, in a tracking shot which starts from within a television and pulls back through the screen out onto the place where the screen is standing). Speaking of the image in those terms recalls the conception, noted in chapter 1, of motion pictures as an inhabitable world. *Birdman*

applies that potentially colonial sense of a film's diegesis to television. Given that the film similarly and repeatedly traverses barriers that would otherwise be on the way of the camera (the wrought ironwork of a barred window, for instance), one might conclude that computers and mobile phones could undergo the same treatment: any screen could be pierced to enter the world on either side of it.

Amores perros does not share the same view. In the cut that takes the film's action from the diegesis of that scene to the events on the television program, the television frame overtakes the film frame. Instead of the gaze entering the televisual image, the televisual image comes forth and asserts its place in the viewer's presence. In *Amores perros*'s scene, the televisual image behaves more like Quiroga's phantom ladies. This time, Valeria, in her interview, moves through the cut to stand before the audience, superseding the diegesis from which Octavio and Jorge disappeared. The projection room setting gave Quiroga the idea of film stars tearing themselves off the screen. The darkness of the movie theater, coupled with the projected condition of the images, put the viewer in an environment seemingly more conducive to seeing ghosts. But the idea of an image coming to our world is even stronger on screens that do not need a projector – the light of television comes from the screen toward the viewer, making its presence in the viewer's space known. Moreover, screens that become smaller and more portable can be everywhere, burrowing into the most unexpected corners like ghosts, unlimited by space, might. It is the digital screen and the home screen that have brought the image world closer, and more hauntingly, into life. Non-film media realize the fantasy of the phantom image. The screen and the image are the same, so the screen is also the image's body (notice how, with every new television and mobile device, the tendency is to reduce the screen's bulk to a vanishing point). It is the fact of the screen, and the idea that, even within the screen, the moving image can transmit

the actuality of that which the screen cannot reach (as if the moving image could simultaneously breach the screen that contains it while remaining contained by it) what enables the development of the visionary perception behind poetic creation. Poetic investigations can and do tackle moving images regardless of where they play. A poetic approach is not exclusive of cinema. How television and digital media inspire that approach holds many future inquiries.

5.3 BAD WORDS

Asked about *Birdman*'s success, Ayala Blanco expressed some approval for his compatriot Iñárritu's style change:

In his first films, what [he] does is not so much fragment a sequence as hyperfragment it: it was a kind of pulverization. His flashbacks (like those in *21 Grams*) are unnecessary, useless, and redundant. By contrast, after distancing himself from Arriaga, he makes films of greater integrity; we can see that in *Birdman*, which is filmed as if in a single take. What Iñárritu did was go from one pole to the other: from fragmentation to linearity.⁹

The reason for asking Ayala Blanco about one of Iñárritu's most acclaimed films, besides the authority of his career, appears plain in those words: he has been one of Mexico's most vocal Iñárritu skeptics from the very start. Ayala Blanco panned *Amores perros*. Speaking of that film in several separate occasions, a neologism of his coinage comes up over and over: he called the film a "*película apantallapendejos*."¹⁰ The latter word combines two vocables: the verb "*apantallar*," or "to amaze," although it more literally evokes a very specific, strange and telling action: "to turn into a screen" or "to put on a screen" (how fitting that this expression, which appears in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Colombia, links amazement with the

⁹ Quoted in Rosario Reyes and Eduardo Bautista, "*González Iñárritu ante el cielo del cine*" in *El Financiero*, January 15th, 2015, <http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/after-office/gonzalez-inarritu-ante-el-cielo-del-cine.html> (accessed on May 10th, 2017).

¹⁰ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La fugacidad del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Océano, 2001), 485.

screen); and the expletive “*pendejo*,” which is a term for pubic hair, but also denotes either “asshole” or “very stupid person.” A translation that conveys the meaning of the neologism, but fails completely to capture its wit, is “a film that amazes enormous idiots” (if I were to suggest a translation, it would be “dumbass-pleasing”). The critic delivers a pointedly unflattering picture of *Amores perros* and its admirers, calling out what he sees as the film’s cosmetic miserabilism (a constant in “prestige” Mexican cinema that Ayala Blanco tends to deem exploitative) and pretention. *Birdman* looks like a bit of course correction in terms of its syntax and treatment of time, even if it remains a “megalomaniac story.” It is curious that Ayala Blanco thinks *Birdman* is less ostentatious than *Amores perros*. To me, it appears to be just the opposite, especially in moments like the TV transition scenes – the complicated mechanics behind the screen-piercing tracking shot make themselves too visible compared to the simplicity of the single cut in *Amores perros*. The latter also seems closer to how viewers can experience media in the ecological, causal sense that poetic investigations, as I have described them, stimulate. *Birdman*’s camera is a display of power over image-making, and its penetration of the screen contrasts with the anti-colonial sentiment of opening up to the image’s presence.

Still, *Amores perros* did not exude simplicity for Ayala Blanco, but pyrotechnics that astonished those unaware of more complex ways of understanding cinema. His discontent with the film seemed fairly typical – by the turn of the century, when *Amores perros* was released, he had built a contrarian’s reputation, and made a habit of championing little-seen movies and severely criticizing the consensus favorites. This attitude, and the language that came with it, did not change between his work for news outlets and academic publishers. Terms like “*apantallapendejos*” do not often appear in prestigious film and media studies journals. And yet, it is common in Ayala Blanco’s journalistic and essayistic work. The neologism is there in *La*

fugacidad del cine mexicano (*The Fugacity of Mexican Cinema*, 2001), the “F” of Ayala Blanco’s alphabetical history of Mexican cinema. What does it mean in the context of Mexican film writing – journalistic, academic and literary – that one of its leading figures invents untranslatable insults throughout his work? It acquires significance for the poetic attitude of film criticism when one thinks about Ayala Blanco in the light of Octavio Paz’s hugely resonant take on “bad words” in his diagnosis of Mexican identity, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: “these words are definitive and categorical, despite their ambiguities and the ease with which their meanings change. They are bad words, the only living language in a world of anemic vocables. They are poetry within everyone’s reach.”¹¹ It is this last part what connects most strongly with one purpose of poetic investigations: to reach readers, to be accessible through verbal beauty and immediacy. They also make transculturation readily available. Bad words, like poetic investigations, are great promoters of multicultural contact zones, a point where people connect on a familiar emotional plane that even makes assimilating other languages (and, thus, other ways of thinking) desirable. Swearing to artfully voice a reaction to a film is a practice almost as old as cinema itself, a mix of disappointment with a dramatic work and the verbal expression of emotion that viewers can share across linguistic differences. As Gawinkowska, Paradowski and Bilewicz say in their study of the phenomenon of emotion-related language choice: “[n]ot only does [swearing and using taboo words] evoke a lot of excitement and strong feelings, but it also enjoys much more attention from language learners than other vocabulary items, or grammatical structures – sometimes swear words are the only lexis they know in the language.”¹² Also,

¹¹ Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 74.

¹² Marta Gawinkowska, Michał B. Paradowski and Michał Bilewicz, “Second Language as an Exemptor from Sociocultural Norms. Emotion-Related Language Choice Revisited” in *PLoS One* 8, no. 12, December 11th, 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3859501/> (accessed on May 20th, 2017).

studies show that “non-native speakers acquire foreign-language swear words relatively fast.”¹³ Hoping to “*Apantallapendejos*” might be difficult to translate, but readers would be quick to pick up the meaning and the feelings it evokes. Ayala Blanco’s verdict on *Amores perros* is an intersection between the accessibility of creative language and a process of encountering familiarity in difference that opens a reader to an apparent other. That’s what poetic investigations can do: put poetry and learning (in this case, of a film culture) within everyone’s reach.

When speaking of taboo words, however, further reflection is required. Their offensive consequences must not be taken lightly. Masha Salazkina identifies another important concern when film scholarship ventures outside the established canon of theory: the lowering of standards in the academic discipline.¹⁴ Allowing the entrance of terms like “*pendejo*,” in all its unruly informality, into a field of study, certainly appears to damage the credibility and seriousness of research. But if one does include bad words in scholarship with the goal of increasing access to the field does not mean that one is reducing the writers’ and the readers’ labor in the production of knowledge. Quite the contrary: taboo terms demand a commitment to the responsibility of making words count, of imbuing them with purpose at every turn. Putting poetry within everyone’s reach means asking everyone to be forever conscious of the effects of language choices. Because it asks that everyone choose one’s words thoughtfully, it asks that everyone think like writers – in fact, that everyone *be* writers. And that is not an easy proposition: on the subject of cinema, Girish Shambu has observed that there is an “anxiety of the cinephile in claiming herself to be a writer.”¹⁵ He quotes Emmanuel Burdeau’s remarks about the work of *Cahiers du cinéma* critics to show the extent to which even illustrious wordsmiths

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Salazkina, “Introduction: Film Theory in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization,” 343.

¹⁵ Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*, 26.

can disavow their authorial status: “Insofar as concerns *Cahiers*,” says Burdeau, “writing might be just as important as cinema. That is not to say that we consider ourselves writers, in the sense of genuine literary authors.”¹⁶ In the face of those comments, Shambu observes that “the anxiety about claiming the word ‘writer’ for film criticism is truly astonishing.”¹⁷

If one asked any of *Nuevo Cine*’s critics if they considered themselves writers, I suspect the answer would be quite different. The authors of poetic investigations have never showed any discomfort with the “writer” label. I believe studying their works can give academic cinema studies a perspective on the rewards of embracing writing on cinema with literary aspirations. It presents new opportunities to locate, disseminate and defend the moving image’s vital work of showcasing humanity’s myriad forms. A history of Mexican poetic inquiries into cinema can assist in Shambu’s vision of a wider idea of cinema study:

I am wondering if the landscape of new cinephilia, which has made available a greater range of technologically enabled expressive resources than ever before, can help allay these anxieties. In other words, it is my hope that the proliferation of multiple forms of cinephilic expression on the Internet will help relax our anxiety about what “authentically” counts as writing – and thus broaden the definition of what writing about cinema might look like.¹⁸

Allaying the anxiety of the “writer” designation means acquiring comfort with one’s own capacity to write beautifully and compellingly, which in turn entails realizing and treasuring our talent for seeing beauty in the moving image and the world. On technological and cultural fronts, scholars can find ways to increase and intensify the viewing and writing practices by which to develop those abilities. Mexican poetic investigations show those searches already have a long history.

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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