

Feeling Monstrous: Embodiment and Latinx American Speculative Cinema

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Given the intimate relation between imagination and survival, my work analyzes the power of cultural production to disrupt oppressive colonial logics, figuring film viewership as an important locus for these transformative encounters. *Feeling Monstrous: Embodiment and Latinx American Speculative Cinema* explores the political function of emotion and the senses in 21st c. genre films of the Hispanophone and Lusophone western hemisphere, critically examining fantastical and dystopian visions that center marginalized socio-political identities. This project draws together feminist theories of posthumanism, film phenomenology and Latin American theories of coloniality to analyze monstrous bodies within twenty-first century cinema from the U.S., Guatemala, Cuba, and Brazil. I take a hemispheric approach in constructing my archive of films that considers the shared history of Spanish and Portuguese speakers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, not limiting my objects of analysis to a rigidly defined geographical region but rather emphasizing the peripheral perspectives of those subject to coloniality within this hemisphere and the increasingly transnational nature of cultural production.

Each of my four chapters examines the use of speculative genre cinema conventions (science fiction, fantasy, and horror) to create specific sensorial dynamics within four transnational films: *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera 2008), *Juan of the Dead* (Brugués 2011), *La Llorona* (Bustamante 2019), and *Good Manners* (Rojas & Dutra 2017). I analyze how these films mobilize posthuman politics and aesthetics in their aim to unsettle hegemonic visual regimes and refuse essentializing

stances and identities, centering the monstrous body as a key site of boundary transgression.

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I. Introduction

So long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into an oppositional category of not-me. Once, however, it begins to resemble those of us who lay claim to the primary term of identity, or to reflect back aspects of ourselves that are repressed, then its indeterminate status - neither wholly self nor wholly other - becomes deeply disturbing. In short, what is at stake is not simply the status of those bodies which might be termed monstrous, but the being in the body of us all. To valorise the monster, then, is to challenge the parameters of the subject as defined within logocentric discourse.

- Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*

A meek young boy transforms into a werewolf, kills his best friend, and later attempts to kill a young girl, but his mother prevents it by shooting him in the leg. She smuggles him home, chains him to the wall, and begins to tend to his wound, gently removing the bullet with surgical instruments and murmuring reassurances to her son while he growls and lunges against his chains. The mother, growing increasingly aware of the angry mob of neighbors heading toward her home to attack the werewolf, makes a desperate choice—she must release the creature from its bonds so that he can help defend them against the intruders. In a trembling voice, she sings him a lullaby while caressing first his shackled paw, then his furry head. In the warm, shadowy blue and purple lighting of the scene, the adopted werewolf boy and his Black mother seem to have the same dark skin and hair coloring. Seemingly transfixed by the mother's voice and touch, the werewolf calms and his gaze softens, but when the neighbors begin pounding on the door he begins to growl fiercely again. His mother hurries to remove his chains, he crouches to face her, and she tentatively reaches out her shaking, bloody hand. He hesitates, clasps her hand in an extreme close-up, then woman and werewolf slowly stand as one, their backs turned away from the camera as it zooms out, both preparing to face the consequences for their deviation from the social order.

The above describes the last scene of the 2017 Brazilian film *As Boas Maneiras* (*Good Manners*), co-directed by Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra. Its combination of art-house and commercial genre film aesthetics displays, as one reviewer put it, “a carnival of the senses,”¹ presenting viewers with multiple affective registers with which to engage, from horror, to musical, to romantic drama. The film’s hybrid aesthetics align with its combined narrative (it is composed of two distinct parts), as well as the overall theme and message of the film: that modern Brazilian social categories and codes of “good” behavior are oppressive for queer and intersectional identities, and that the binaries of nature versus culture, human versus non-human, are increasingly brittle and insufficient to account for the heterogeneity of lived experience. Through its narrative and stylistic choices, the film promotes an empathetic view of embodied experiences traditionally deemed unnatural, deviant, or unruly.

The use of cinematic monsters to convey anxiety over social norms and cultural differences is not new—monsters, vampires, and ghosts have haunted the frame since the very beginning of film history. In Hollywood, horror and science fiction seem to proliferate endlessly, having now moved from the margins into the mainstream with films like *Interstellar* (Nolan 2014), *Ex Machina* (Garland 2014), Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) and *Nope* (2022), and most recently *The Substance* (Fargeat 2024)—all high-grossing films that also received critical acclaim. Peele’s films are particularly notable for the way in which they utilize horror and science fiction stylistic conventions and themes to explore the lived experience of racism and the policing of Black bodies in the United States. In Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, the three Latin American countries with the most robust film industries², horror films have seen a gradual

¹ <https://cineuropa.org/es/newsdetail/332675/>

² These three countries are responsible for 90% of the approximately 12,500 films produced in Latin America between 1930 and 2000 (Paz 82).

increase since the late 1990s, leading Gustavo Subero to proclaim that “Latin American filmic production since the turn of the twenty-first century clearly evidences a resurgence of horror films” (xxiii). As Mariano Paz notes in his survey of 20th century science fiction cinema in Latin America, science fiction films were scant until the after the early 1950s, with Mexico producing the largest amount (over 100 feature films) between the early 1950s and the early 1980s, most often starring popular comedians like Cantinflas or *luchadores* (wrestlers) like Santo and Blue Demon (Demonio Azul) in narratives featuring alien invasions or mad scientists (83-4). These films, despite the perception that they are naïve or simple, nevertheless contain strong political critiques of authoritarian practices and corruption in the Mexican government. Paz utilizes Nestor Garcia Canclini’s concept of hybridity to understand Latin American sci-fi cinema, arguing

While Latin American sf cinema is heavily influenced by American sf, borrowing extensively from its narrative conventions and iconography (alien invasions, political dystopias, cybernetic organisms, ray guns, demented scientists and so on), the films, as we have seen, incorporate local figures, such as Santo, and storylines and ideas that allude to political and social matters specific to the region. Thus, there is a clear and consistent process of negotiation between the global elements of the genre and local cultural traditions. (100)

More recently, this negotiation of local and global elements can be seen in speculative Latinx American films such as *Children of Men* (U.S./U.K., Cuarón 2006), *Corazón Azul/Blue Heart* (Cuba, Coyula 2021), *Bacurau* (Brazil, Filho & Dornelles 2019), *La Región Salvaje/The Untamed* (Mexico, Escalante 2016), *Selva Trágica/Tragic Jungle* (Mexico, Olaizola 2020), and *Blue Beetle* (U.S., Soto 2023), among others. All of these films contain strong political themes,

with critiques of racism, imperialism, coloniality, sexism/misogyny, and authoritarianism underlying imaginative narratives featuring characters who disturb the boundaries of the human. These trends would seem to suggest that, while critics and scholars tend to disregard popular genre films as mere passive entertainment (or obscure their genre elements in favor of including them within the realm of art cinema), they nevertheless serve an important function in understanding the affective dimension of our political present.

This dissertation evaluates the function of “monstrous feelings” in key films produced throughout the hemisphere between 2008 and 2019: *Sleep Dealer* (Rivera 2008), *Juan of the Dead* (Brugués 2010), *Good Manners* (Dutra & Rojas 2017), and *La Llorona* (Bustamante 2019). The monstrous, unruly body emerges as a thread that traverses several genres—distinctions between horror, science fiction, and fantasy are intentionally elided in these slippery, hybrid works. While I do examine the ways in which each film takes up specific genre conventions, my focus is on the ways in which the films foreground monstrous bodies and encourage a vulnerable viewership in which the spectator is invited to feel unsettled or disturbed by onscreen depictions of technological/organic fusions, the violent tearing of flesh, and supernatural possession. At the same time, the emotional responses incited by these images cannot be contained within conventional genre narrative structures—we are meant to laugh at the decapitation of zombies, look upon a bloody werewolf birth with awe and tenderness, and feel triumphant about a violent ghostly possession. The spectator’s feelings are encouraged to deviate from their accustomed channels. The transgression of boundaries is a key element uniting all four of these films, both as it is represented on the screen and as it manifests in the film-spectator encounter. This reflects a broader concern with shifting sociopolitical identities that refuse binary

categorization, as well as an emerging disenchantment with aesthetic purity and official/institutional narratives.

These cinematic monsters I analyze exemplify a larger trend in some recent Latinx American cinema that is interested in using non-realist aesthetics to refuse an imposed paradigm of passive vulnerability (enforced through discourses of extreme nationalism, heteronormativity, or techno-capitalist dominance) and instead present visions of agentic marginal characters. In each of the films I examine, a subaltern subject interacts with or becomes a monstrous figure (a zombie, a ghost, a werewolf, and a cyborg). At the same time, these films strategically operate genre aesthetics to make the spectator vulnerable, engaging both the cognitive faculties and the senses. Ultimately, this openness to deviant feelings is sought for the purpose of fostering empathy towards other bodies that exist beyond the category of the human, beings that are marginal, disenfranchised, or dehumanized. This study aims to examine how monstrosity in Latinx American cinema illuminates the insufficiency of dominant frameworks in accounting for forms of knowledge and relationality that evade and/or refuse essentializing narratives.

Genre Film and Latinx America

Speculative film genres have a history of global popular appeal, both in terms of the widespread popularity of Hollywood films in these genres, and the production of speculative genre cinema in other countries. I utilize the term “speculative” as an umbrella term to refer to science fiction, fantasy, and horror, subgenres of fiction films that depart from a realist approach, containing imaginative elements that contradict known laws of physics, biology, time, and space. As Silvia Dibeltulo and Ciara Barrett observe, “it is evident that genre is still widely used as a marketing tool and theoretical framework around which discourses of production, distribution,

classification, interpretation, and reception are articulated in the context of film and media studies” and has continuing relevance for examinations of global issues related to gender, race, class, and sexuality (2). At the same time, speculative genre boundaries are becoming increasingly unstable, especially given newer modes of transnational and transmedial film production and circulation in the 21st century. Hybrid genres such as the musical fantasy, the horror-comedy, the sci-fi thriller, etc. are commonly found in national cinemas across the globe.

As some filmmakers themselves note, genre can be a practical way to get their films in front of audiences, and it can also be a way for newer filmmakers to achieve recognition for their mastery over an established set of aesthetic codes and conventions. Nevertheless, genre films, like all films, are never separate from the political and cultural conditions from which they emerge, and science fiction and horror traditionally contain elements of social critique³. Increasingly, particularly for women and for queer filmmakers, genre conventions are being utilized as a means to probe what is “horrific” about our historical present. Barbara Creed, known for her seminal work of feminist horror film criticism *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) updates her original framework in her 2022 book *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: The Feminist New Wave* to better understand the most recent cycle of global feminist cinema. This new “monstrous” cinema, she argues, although strongly influenced by the horror genre, cannot be confined by it—instead, it “both embraces and exceeds” its conventions. Therefore, rather than focus on cinema that conforms to the traditional parameters of horror, Creed posits that certain films illustrate “the horrific” and the monstrous via multiple

³ As Vivian Sobchack observes about the U.S. science fiction film, “contemporary SF has attempted to map the new world space we inhabit, to imagine other forms of being, to give us a picture of multinationalism, to represent narratively the altered significance of difference, sameness, boundaries, marginality” (301). Similarly, as David Diffrient notes, horror films “reveal how social divisions or a fragmenting of the body politic are often allegorized in this most disintegrative of cultural forms” (6).

different genres and genre-hybrids (3). Creed argues that “Feminist New Wave films also constitute a key terrain for the exploration of ethics and the lived, sensory experiences of women and others who are oppressed and embark on a journey of self-questioning” (2). Crucially, these explorations of the horrific nature of hetero-patriarchy, racism, and violent and apathetic state structures do not leave their protagonists to suffer as passive victims—instead, monstrosity becomes an empowering, subversive concept that motivates revolt. My project draws from this notion of monstrosity, but I broaden the notion of monstrous cinema beyond feminist films. I also depart from Creed’s psychoanalytic method to look more closely at how films aim to solicit certain feelings as a way to get “in touch” with others and with ourselves, and to expose humans’ material and embodied entanglements with the other-than-human.

The concept of the monstrous has been vital for scholars and artists interested in rebelling against repressive and normative conceptions of the human. Posthumanism challenges the humanist tradition that has long positioned humanity as distinct from and superior to animals, machines, and the environment. Within Latinx American cinema, posthumanist concerns intersect with local histories of colonial violence, neoliberal exploitation, and Indigenous epistemologies that have long questioned Western humanist paradigms. The use of science fiction and horror genre conventions to craft aesthetics that provoke a combination of disgust, pleasure, and eerie discomfort rely on affective and sensory engagement to challenge the audience’s perception, and therefore within this project I also draw from film phenomenology to highlight the ways in which cinema is an embodied experience that transcends mere visual representation, implicating the viewer’s body through sound, texture, and affective resonance.

I understand these films’ engagement with the monstrous (adhering to varying degrees to speculative genre conventions) to serve two principal functions: the first is an invitation to feel

that simultaneously opens a channel for considering one's feelings toward others, providing opportunities for creating politicized affective alliances. The second is to prompt viewers to think differently about the notion of the human, to consider how the human, as Rosi Braidotti and other posthuman theorists observe, is imbricated within a web of technological and organic entities and influences, not static but in a perpetual state of becoming. Linda Williams' influential 1991 essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess" applies a feminist methodology to seriously examine the cultural function performed by the genres of pornography, horror, and melodrama (in this case specifically concerning relations between genders), concluding that

To dismiss [these genres] as bad excess whether of explicit sex, violence, or emotion, or as bad perversions, whether of masochism or sadism, is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving. Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of these problems. (12)

Williams' essay prompted a revalorization of "excess" in audiovisual production, and scholars have begun to look more closely at what occurs in the encounter between spectator-body and screen-body, and how the emotional impacts of this encounter might travel beyond the screen and outside the theater. Movies that move us to emotional extremes, as Nilo Couret notes, "...nos permiten sentir el potencial o la capacidad inherente en el mundo [allow us to feel the potential or inherent capacity in the world]" (157, translation mine). Additionally, a deeper attention to sensorial effects and emotions also leads to a consideration of how bodies shift in every affective encounter (including with films)—how we become "moved." As Couret points out, affect studies lead us to a reconsideration of the body not as a delimited territory contained by skin, but as an "interfaz [interface]" capable of being affected and stimulated (160).

Couret observes that the Latin American region has a history of emotional populist rhetoric that dammed currents of resistance in order to conduct them toward nationalist projects, which has led many Latin Americanists to eschew the celebratory rhetoric of affect theory (161). However, it can also function as a diagnostic tool to better understand how state mechanisms capture and wield affects for the purposes of stoking nationalist sentiments and militarism. Couret, whose work examines the subversive affective politics of the Latin American comedy film, argues that “una política afectiva propone que entreguemos nuestro sensorio para transformar los sentidos, sometiénolos a una suerte de entrenamiento sensorial que redibujaría nuestro cuerpo y reorientaría nuestra relación con el cuerpo social. [an affective politics proposes that we submit our sensorium to transform our senses, subjecting them to a kind of sensorial training that redraws our bodies and reorients our relation to the social body]” (162, my translation). This affective politics does not aim to merely resituate our bodies in fixed positions, rather it maintains a tension between what persists and what escapes, a potent potentiality: “La teoría de la afectividad encuentra un componente político en los experimentos con nuevas modalidades de ser, en ser atravesado por otros cuerpos y en devenir parte de otra colectividad. [The theory of affect finds a political component in experiments with new ways of being, in being penetrated by other bodies and in becoming part of another collectivity]” (162, my translation). Like Couret, I contend that a deep and sustained attention to affect and emotion allows us to better understand the potential for cinema to expand our sensorium in empathetic directions, toward other bodies and ways of being/knowing. Furthermore, my examination of a Latinx American cinema of monstrosity reveals an even fiercer commitment to evading capture by some while reaching for communion with others, drawing on genre aesthetics to heighten

tensions between competing emotional states, as well as focusing more explicitly on the screened body's permeability and susceptibility to change.

As Luisela Alvaray notes, “since the 1990s the new interdependent flows of transnational media have brought about a new attention to genre,” and genre films operate as “unstable contact zones of a wide variety of national, regional and transnational determinants” (69). Scholars of global and transnational horror and science fiction also advocate for understanding films produced outside of the Global North as generators of genre, rather than as merely passive receivers of Hollywood genres, as do Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells in their introduction to a collection of critical writing on global science fiction cinema. Their approach sheds light on the ways in which “no particular film industry, national cinema, or set of cinematic conventions has the monopoly on imagining the possibilities and perils of globalization and technological modernity” (xiii). While there has been some increasing scholarly attention given to Latin American genre films, the focus has been primarily on the melodrama, the thriller, the road movie, and the coming-of-age film. There has been little work done on Latin American horror films (Gustavo Subero's *Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Horror Cinema: Embodiments of Evil* and Gabriel Eljaiek Rodriguez's *The Migration and Politics of Monsters in Latin American Cinema* are two among a handful of exceptions), and although scholarly work on regional science fiction literature has been increasing, as of this writing I am not aware of any published book focused on regional Latin American science fiction cinema. The present work therefore seeks to respond to Alvaray's observation that “more work needs to be done to register and interpret the functions of genre in regional film industries” (69). At the same time, my focus on the relationship between monstrosity, emotion, and the

senses builds upon an emerging facet of Latin American film studies, wherein the affective is attended to as a key element of the political.

Laura Podalsky's monograph *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Latin American Cinema* makes important strides in mapping affects throughout a large body of films from Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Brazil, and argues that films produced from the late 1990s through the first decade of the 21st century break with the older era of New Latin American Cinema of the 1960s and 70s in part through their sensorial and emotional appeals. Podalsky examines how contemporary Latin American films are involved in generating and circulating affective flows in a way that is socially and culturally significant, against prevalent ideas about the "waning of affect" in postmodern society (a notion famously proposed by Fredric Jameson). Certain films, she argues, "reanimate our perceptive capacities" and probe the limitations of the visual as the sole locus of knowledge "in ways that disrupt and interrupt, rather than rupture, cinematic conventions" (19). In addition, "the films' destabilization of the visual is paralleled by formal maneuvers that encourage us to acknowledge what the body knows" (20). Like Podalsky, I am interested in how recent Latinx American films utilize new formal methods to wrestle with national histories of dictatorship, coloniality, genocide, and (im)migration. At the same time, I expand upon her work to consider the impact on Latinx American cinema of global 21st century reformulations of social relations within what Rosi Braidotti terms "the posthuman convergence." For Braidotti, this is the present historical condition of the Anthropocene, marked by three major changes:

First, at the social level we are witnessing increasing structural injustices through the unequal distribution of wealth, prosperity, and access to technology. Second, at the environmental level we are confronted with the devastation of species and a decaying

planet, struck by climate crisis and new epidemics. And third, at the technological level, the status and condition of the human is being redefined by the life sciences and genomics, neural sciences and robotics, nanotechnologies, the new information technologies and the digital interconnections they afford us. (3-4)

These global conditions are felt and manifest in particular ways in Latinx America, and monstrous cinema responds by combining critiques of these injustices with creative imaginings of a way out of damaged, confining conceptions of the human. Braidotti's critical posthumanism (following the work of Donna Haraway, Stacy Alaimo, and others) allows for a reconceptualization of the human as a "...heterogeneous assemblage: 'we' is an inextricable mix of humans and non-humans" (103). Artistic production in the speculative mode is essential for the cultivation of radical imaginations and the development of counternarratives. As Braidotti also notes, "the affective and political alliance of women, monsters, goddesses, cyborgs, LGBTQ+ and other anomalies is reflected in a rich feminist literature of love for monsters" (218) and this alliance "manifests a chain of solidarity between the sexualized, racialized and naturalized 'others' of white, urbanized, heteronormative 'Man'" (219).

I utilize the term "Latinx America" to signal my hemispheric approach to these cinemas which emphasizes a shared history of, and ongoing struggle against, (neo)colonialism, racism, and hetero-patriarchy on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, I attend to local cultural and historical specificities to avoid homogenization, understanding that the terms "Latin," "Latinx," and "American" are all fraught with oppressive histories, and their use still excludes many communities (especially Indigenous and Afro-descendent) for whom these labels are insufficient. "Latinx America" also emphasizes the presence of "Latinx" identities within the United States, blurring the boundary that separates the U.S. from the Caribbean and Central and

South America. In my first chapter, I discuss how for Alex Rivera, the Peruvian-American director of the film *Sleep Dealer*, a transborder “migrant-mind space” is visualized in his oeuvre that brings to life the “imaginary in-between place of...suspended identity” (375). The simultaneous presence and absence required of migrant subjects is most accurately depicted, for Rivera, through digital visual tools because these “express how [Latinos] are a composited, morphed, virtual people” (376). This sense of being in process, mutable yet simultaneously corporeal and present is a focal point of not just Rivera’s film, but much of recent monstrous cinematic production. My third chapter analyzes *La Llorona*, in which the character Alma arrives in the dictator’s household as a being who is both present and absent; she is the ghost of a woman murdered by the military general in the recent past, but simultaneously an embodied Mayan woman whose presence in the diegetic present materially disturbs the Monteverde family. For Indigenous subjects in Guatemala in the aftermath of the Civil War, who also suffer ongoing discrimination and institutional neglect (the explicit subject of Bustamante’s previous film, *Ixcánul*) there is also a sense of “suspended identity” in which Indigenous presence is simultaneously required—for domestic labor, agricultural work, etc.—and disavowed, made invisible through the suppression of Mayan language and identity. Latinx American monstrous cinema thus often exceeds national boundaries in terms of production (acquiring financing from multiple countries, working with international casts and crews, etc.) as well as subverts nationalist discourses by emphasizing the lived experiences of individuals and groups that are obscured by (or expelled from) state institutions and homogenizing societal norms.

Emotion and the Senses

My analysis of emotion and the senses in relation to Latinx American monstrous cinema raises questions about what constitutes the body and how its limits are constantly re-drawn in relation to other bodies. In this way, critical posthumanism, an approach to culture, politics, and artistic production that is interested in the reconfiguration of the human body in relation to the other-than-human, can create a productive resonance with phenomenological film scholarship, which is interested in the mutual creation of the film-object and the spectator's body. Vivian Sobchack proposes a more expansive definition of cinematic perception that is profoundly embodied, in which the "sensuous and affective dimensions" of the film experience are not merely enjoyable side effects, but fundamental to meaning-making (58). Foregrounding embodied experience enables a

...materialist—rather than idealist—understanding of aesthetics and ethics" and therefore "our own lived bodies provide the material premises that enable us, from the first, to sense and respond to the world and others—not only grounding the logical premises of aesthetics and ethics in 'carnal thoughts' but also charging our conscious awareness with the energies and obligations that animate our 'sensibility' and 'responsibility.' This is a bottom-up emergence of aesthetic and ethical sense as it is written by carnal experience on—and as—our bodies rather than a top-down and idealist imposition on them.

(Sobchack 3)

By recognizing the ways in which our bodies are marked by encounters with objects and others (and mark them in turn), we can better understand the ways in which we are vulnerable to, and intimately bound up with, others. Sobchack stresses the interactive and mutually permeable interaction of the film-body and spectator-body—an intersubjective encounter in which the senses ground and contribute to conscious analysis. Laura Marks brings this phenomenological

approach to bear on the experimental films and video art of diasporic artists in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, exploring their attempts to “translate to an audiovisual medium the knowledges of the body, including the unrecordable memories of the senses” (5). She argues that even though cinema only directly engages two senses (vision and hearing), the mimetic responses films provoke in the viewer’s body activate the memory of all five senses, which are often tied to emotions. And because cultural histories are encoded in the body, “we bring our own personal and cultural organization of the senses to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the senses to us, the filmmaker’s own sensorium refracted through the cinematic apparatus” (153).

My aim is not primarily to investigate how films are received by audiences or to perform an empirical analysis of a film’s impact on particular kinds of bodies. I concur with scholars such as Katharina Lindner, who argues that much of the work on film phenomenology relies too much on “paradoxically universalized and ahistorical understandings of embodiment, spatiality, and perception” (136), resulting often in the elision of differences in embodied perception between genders, racialized bodies, and bodies with varying sensorial abilities. Indeed, the notion of a universal spectator body contradicts my conception of spectator bodies as mutable and shaped by sociocultural factors. Instead, my approach follows that of Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, who argue that “each type of cinema (as well as every film theory) imagines an ideal spectator, which means it postulates a certain relation between the (body of the spectator) and the (properties of the) image on the screen” (4). I take this to mean that the task of the scholar then becomes to rigorously examine a film’s phenomenological project, or the feelings it aims to solicit, through formal analysis alongside examinations of the historical and cultural conditions of a film’s production, given that somatic reactions and emotions are culturally conditioned. I am

deeply indebted here to Sara Ahmed's theorization of "affective economies." For Ahmed, "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation...The circulation of objects allows us to think about the 'sociality' of emotion" (8). Yet this does not divorce emotions from bodies, because

what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitation, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others. (Ahmed 11)

Thus, in my view, the manner in which a film imagines an embodied encounter with its viewers matters because it gives us an indication of the broader sociocultural circulation of feelings and emotions as they shape us and we shape them. Like Ahmed, I do not distinguish between affect and emotion because I understand neither to be static or fixed, but rather always produced in an encounter with other subjects and objects. In this I depart from the Deleuzian line of thinking that understands emotion as "the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (Podalsky 12), distinct from affect which is preconscious, embodied intensity. I therefore use emotion, feeling, and affect somewhat interchangeably.

How then might we understand "monstrous feelings" in Latinx American cinema? Marks introduces the term "intercultural cinema" to describe experimental films made by diasporic artists in Great Britain, Canada, and the U.S. This type of cinema, she argues, "bears witness to the reorganization of the senses that takes place, and the new kinds of sense knowledges that become possible, when people move between cultures," adding that "the senses are a source of social knowledge" (195). In my third chapter, I explore the film *La Llorona* and its use of a

jarring acoustic register to evoke “new kinds of sense knowledges” in the aftermath of another type of disorientation—the trauma occasioned by the Guatemalan Civil War. This film draws on the history of the Guatemalan armed conflict, which killed an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans, 83% of which were Indigenous Maya. Although the peace accords between the Guatemalan government and the insurgents of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) were signed in 1996, “the emotional resonance of conflict continues to be felt across many communities in Guatemala to this day, shaping social relations and in many instances preventing a fractured social body from healing” (Smith 237). I evaluate what the film shares with other works of global Indigenous Cinema that employ a “haunting” aesthetic to evoke the aftermath of violence and displacement. Like the intercultural cinema Marks examines (although her focus is on the “haptic” and not on sound), this film points to the limits of the visual by inciting the aural sense to rekindle embodied knowledge and cultural memory. Its use of haunting and horror aesthetics provokes a heightened state of sensory and emotional response that aims to unsettle its audience, reminding us of the urgent need to address what is yet unresolved for Guatemalan Indigenous communities. As the film’s director noted when asked in an interview about his choice to utilize horror, “when you go to see a horror movie, you are open because you want to be touched. So, it lends itself to talking about an issue people want to silence.”⁴ Monstrous feelings that emerge in the spectator-film encounter therefore pose a challenge to the organization of emotions promoted by hegemonic entities like the authoritarian state and the military, which aim to erase pain or channel rage towards a particular class or nation. In *Juan de los Muertos*, which I discuss in my second chapter, the Cuban state’s insistence on unidirectional outrage towards United States imperialism is parodied, and other emotions emerge to challenge

⁴ <https://goldenglobes.com/articles/la-llorona-guatemala-in-conversation-with-jayro-bustamante/>

it—first an apathetic pragmatism, then a longing for unity based on mutual love and care rather than an enforced, rote collectivism.

Monstrous feelings in these films, by engaging the non-visual senses (the haptic and the aural) and evoking embodied memories, also present an alternative to the current culture of “hypervisibility,” which as Avery Gordon argues, insists that “everything can be seen” and leads us to “believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result” (16). By contrast, the cinematic monstrous insists upon conveying the often-horrific sensory experiences of oppressed and marginalized subjects, forcing audiences to reckon with what our own unruly bodies know.

The Monstrous and the Posthuman

The monstrosity of Latinx America has a genealogy that extends back to the period of the Conquest and leads this hemisphere to have a particular historically weighted relation to the idea of the human. Sylvia Wynter contends that our present moment is characterized by the struggle for dominance by the Western, bourgeois “ethnaclass” (“Man”), which overrepresents itself as if it were the Human itself. In order to disrupt what Aníbal Quijano terms the “coloniality of power,” Wynter argues, it is necessary to delink Man from Human. According to Wynter, the Renaissance humanist conception of the Human led to a “science” of race that categorized humanity according to degrees of distance from “nature,” leading to the inauguration of the “colonial difference” in the Western hemisphere which turned Indigenous peoples and Black Africans into the “savage, irrational Other” opposed to the rational and enlightened Western Human (Wynter 266). Racialized non-Europeans were framed as monstrous from Columbus’

initial encounter with the native inhabitants of the island Carib, whom he described as flesh-eaters (“Caniba,” which became *canibal* or cannibal) in the diary of his first voyage. As Persephone Braham observes, having read Marco Polo’s travelogues and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, Columbus arrived in the New World well acquainted with the variety of monsters he might encounter, including anthropophagi, dog-headed men, and other fantastical creatures, thus preparing him to interpret what he saw and heard according to these previous accounts (57). Cannibals, Amazonian female warriors, big-footed giants (after which the region of Patagonia was named), and other monsters became persistent symbols of regional and national identity.

Beginning in the 20th century, cultural production sought to redefine these figures (most notably the cannibal) in relation to postcolonial identity construction. Carlos Jáuregui traces the development of the figure of the cannibal and its modern iterations, noting that “Así como el tropo caníbal ha sido signo de la alteridad de América y ha servido para sostener el edificio discursivo del imperialismo, puede articular—como en efecto ha hecho—discursos contra la invención de América y el propio colonialismo [Just as the cannibal trope has been a sign of American alterity and has served to sustain the discursive edifice of imperialism, it can articulate—as in effect it has done—discourses against the invention of America and colonialism itself.] (13, my translation). Among the most well-known examples of this phenomenon is the Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifiesto Antropófago,” published in 1928, which reintroduces the cannibal as a “code-eater” who devours the colonizer’s culture and worldview and refashions it into something new—an autochthonous national symbol. Later, Cuban essayist and poet Roberto Fernández Retamar rereads Shakespeare’s Caliban as a fundamental figure representing *mestizo* colonized Latin America, an insurgent subaltern who rebels against Prospero (interpreted as U.S. neo-colonialism) in his famous 1971 essay “Calibán:

apuntes sobre la cultura en nuestra América” (“Caliban: notes on culture in our America”). For both de Andrade and Retamar, the monstrous figure functioned as a redrawing of antagonisms within nationalist and regionalist parameters, aiming to describe an authentic Latin American identity in opposition to Euro-Western powers.

The more recent monstrous media I analyze is less interested in rehashing these older battles. Rather than reclaim the monstrous for the purpose of solidifying an essential (if hybrid), autochthonous identity against Euro-Western influence, a cinema of monstrosity aims to destroy binaries of all types. It is characterized by continuous transformation and contradiction; it is revolt(ing) cinema in which “monstrousness is a force for change” (Creed 4). The films I analyze do not rely on stable subjectivities—at any point, a human might be bitten and become a zombie, a boy might become a werewolf, a woman might be possessed by a ghost, a man might become a machine, and these transformations can carry both damaging and empowering potentials. These films rejoice in their “potent and taboo fusions” (Haraway 173) that combine extinction and escape, destruction and speculative creation, not requiring a legitimating body to assess their political and aesthetic purity and authenticity. Instead, they aim to spark a disorienting corporeal response in their viewers, reminding us of the fundamental porosity and interdependence of bodies. Informed by feminist and queer theoretical frameworks which have always been suspicious of the notion of purity of any kind, this project looks for ways in which recent Latinx American monstrous cinema illustrates the possibilities of embracing bodies-in-relation that are in continuous processes of becoming.

This cinema of monstrosity thrashes against the constraints of orderly, logical affects—it passionately strives to renew an embodied understanding of the past while also accommodating the new bodily configurations of the present and future. In this way it is aligned with other

artistic posthuman speculations that welcome the weird, the techno-bodies, the human-animal hybrids, and affirm the monstrous and the alien. It poses the question, if humanism has traditionally distinguished the Human by disentangling it from its base, fleshy desires, natural environment, and material reliance on other bodies (both human and non-human), leading to racial, gendered, and colonialist understanding of human relations, how might a de-centering of the Human enable a more compassionate, anti-colonial approach to these relations? De-centering the human, in these films, becomes not only an acceptance of the non-human (animals, nature, technology, hybrid beings, etc.) but an active gesture of solidarity based on the recognition of what is precarious in the other. Missy Molloy notes that

...a truly critical posthumanism...cannot simply be understood as a discourse about why shifting technological, social, and ecological coordinates mean we are human *no longer*... Rather, it must be understood as a function of the claim that, to paraphrase Latour, we have never been human. Whatever our aspirations to species exceptionalism, “we” have co-evolved with the technicity of tools, share biological substance with nonhuman animals, and have always been radically dependent on the extraction of Earth’s natural resources. Moreover, despite attempts to consolidate human difference into a singular, monolithic model of the human, “difference is already constitutive of the human species, with all of its gendered, ethnic, social, and individual varieties.” We have never been “human” in this strict sense, then; but nor have we ever all been “*considered* fully human.” (4, emphasis in original)

The film that perhaps best exemplifies this notion is Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*, which depicts a segment of the population that has been excluded from accessing this model of the Human—the migrant worker. The film demonstrates the double bind of our desire for connection, which can

be captured and monetized, but can also evade domination when we recognize our interdependence on a larger network of beings. In a strangely political yet tender lovemaking scene, a needle-like metallic jack is inserted into the arm of Memo by his lover Luz, and this action is reciprocated on her. Through these actions, both repulsive and fascinating, these two cyborgs, instead of becoming affect-less drones, become more intensely connected. Their physical embraces are interspersed with visions of the U.S.-Mexico border wall (which is also metaphorically linked to the concrete dam holding back the water for Memo's home community), layering how they (and we) "see" one another. As in all of the films analyzed here, the warmth and love is inflected with pain and unease that never fully resolves, prompting spectators to feel instead a tremulous, nuanced uncertainty about the status of the human.

Chapter Outline

Each of the films analyzed in this dissertation offers a unique lens through which to examine posthumanist themes and sensory engagement. In the first chapter, I closely read the dystopian sci-fi film *Sleep Dealer*, which follows a young Mexican man who is forced to migrate north from his rural community to a futuristic Tijuana and acquire illicit technological enhancements to his body in order to make money. He then utilizes that same technology to connect with other characters who help him to defeat the violent U.S.-owned corporation controlling his community's access to water. I argue that the film employs "rasquache cyborg visuality" to destabilize the spectator's visual sense and disrupt established notions of the body as natural and immutable. By compelling the spectator to engage in an/other way of seeing through its visual techniques, the film encourages an embodied spectatorship that dwells in material, felt connections, which are also uncomfortably contradictory. Drawing upon classic sci-

fi conventions, the film mobilizes a posthuman framework that unsettles and recombines hegemonic visual regimes and refuses essentializing stances and identities. At the same time, its narrative also paradoxically celebrates the entanglement of the biological and the technological within an exploitative and alienating context, as human bodies, bodies of water, and machines are shown to be interdependent and inter-affective.

My second chapter focuses on the zombie-comedy film *Juan de los Muertos/Juan of the Dead* (Brugués, 2011) and speculative trends in recent Cuban cinema. Participating in the global rise of zombie media beginning around the mid-2000s, *Juan* sheds a new light on what “survival” means by situating the zombie apocalypse on an island already suffering from the apocalyptic effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union, tracing the story of a man and his group of “slacker” friends who must rise to the occasion in order to stay alive. I posit that the visual and aural excesses of the zombie horror genre serve to emphasize both the literal and figurative sense of hunger and lack at the heart of the film, thus moving viewers to feel the deadening effects of survival under an embargoed and increasingly authoritarian regime. The sensorial responses prompted by the film’s horror and dystopic elements both connect it to a global network of zombie cinema and subvert the state’s desires to channel and discipline collective emotions.

My third chapter examines the Guatemalan horror/thriller film *La Llorona* (Bustamante 2019) and its engagement with a history of genocide that U.S.-backed military regimes carried out against Mayan communities through the monstrous feminine figure of folklore, La Llorona. The film reimagines the legendary figure of the weeping woman as a vengeful spectral force confronting the legacy of genocide, using eerie soundscapes and sensory suspense to underscore the persistence of historical trauma. I argue that the film’s use of horror genre conventions aims to make its spectators monstrous through inciting feelings of anger and encouraging sensorial

reactions that resonate with memories of trauma, at the same time that it foregrounds female *ladino*-Indigenous coalitions, grounded in embodied knowledge, as essential to its vision of a liberated future. The film's emphasis on sound unsettles the relationship between vision and knowledge in a critique of colonial visibility that aims to objectify and control Indigenous women's bodies. The disembodied, unlocatable cry of the (female, Indigenous) ghost becomes a threatening rupture of this dominating, hierarchical visibility, offering an alternative perception of historical oppression that acknowledges the importance of the senses for activating cultural memory.

The Brazilian film *As Boas Maneiras* (*Good Manners*) (Dutra & Rojas 2017) that I analyze in my fourth and final chapter performs a posthuman feminist critique in a sensorially-laden yet tender narrative that combines horror with pleasure, and fantasy with social realism. *Good Manners* reframes the werewolf myth through an exploration of queer kinship, racialized otherness, and bodily transformation, evoking visceral responses through its visual techniques. The story follows a Black woman in São Paulo who falls in love with a pregnant white woman, then after her death, adopts and raises her werewolf son. Its aesthetic and ethical interventions lie in positioning monstrosity (which allegorizes marginalized sexualities, classes, and racial identities) as something to be embraced (both literally and figuratively) despite the threat of bodily change, reorienting the viewer's sensorium away from disgust and fear of the female body and towards feminine touch and sensibility as a source of healing and renewal.

By bringing posthumanist theory into dialogue with these films, I aim to demonstrate how Latinx American cinema articulates new conceptions of subjectivity, embodiment, and power. I argue that these films not only reflect but actively participate in global theoretical debates about what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. In doing so, they challenge

traditional narratives of identity and offer speculative imaginaries that blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the living and the dead, the organic and the artificial. Additionally, I explore how monstrous cinema employs speculative genre conventions to amplify affective and sensory engagement, making these films not only intellectual explorations of posthumanism but also deeply embodied cinematic experiences. This study ultimately seeks to contribute to both posthumanist scholarship and Latinx American film studies, illuminating how monstrous cinema functions as a site for rethinking humanity in an age of profound transformation.

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II. *Rasquache* cyborg visuality: *Sleep Dealer*'s networked feelings

Tuning in to today's discourse regarding immigration across the southern border of the United States, one immediately encounters words such as "crisis," "invasion," "overwhelming," and recently President Donald Trump referred to illegal immigration as "poisoning the blood" of the country⁵. Such language works to construct the nation as a bounded body that is made vulnerable by abstractly threatening others. As Sara Ahmed notes, detached from particularity, migrants and asylum seekers become hateful insofar as they represent the imagined possibility of injury to, or contamination of, the national body (47). Undifferentiated, migrants become an invasive swarm, a *them* that the *us* (constructed as the Anglo, English-speaking United States citizens) must be protected against, through justifiably violent means. This logic has prompted the production of many feature films in recent years that work to identify Mexican and Central American immigrants as individuals with noble motivations for leaving their homes, films that illustrate their humanity juxtaposed with the inhumane conditions that drive their desperate actions. These include films such as *A Better Life* (Weitz 2011), about a hardworking Mexican immigrant father attempting to protect his son from gang violence (Demian Bichir was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of the noble, beleaguered father), *Under the Same Moon* (Riggen 2007), a melodrama which follows a young boy named Carlitos as he undertakes the border-crossing journey to find his mother with the help of a surly but sympathetic man who ultimately sacrifices his own freedom for Carlitos, and *Sin Nombre* (Fukunaga 2009) which follows two young people who ride the north-bound trains through Mexico and become entangled in the world of gang violence. What these three films have in common is the realistic depiction of the violence that encircles the lives of Mexican and Central

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/05/us/politics/trump-immigration-rhetoric.html>

American migrants, as well as the themes of sacrifice and the morality of individuals whose aims include seeking economic opportunity, safety, and family unification. The film *Sleep Dealer*, released in 2008 and directed by Alex Rivera, presents a striking contrast to these contemporaneous migration dramas. Most noticeably, its use of the science fiction genre immediately distances it from the realism (which sometimes spills over into melodrama) viewers have grown accustomed to associating with stories of immigration and the struggles of Mexican communities against extractive capitalism. Yet similarly notable is its refusal to ennoble the trials of one individual, rather underscoring the relational nature of liberation struggles. It operates a networked vision, positing a view from and as the “swarm” or mass, asking what might a posthuman cyborg sensibility bring to bear on border politics.

Rivera’s blending of forms and remixing of content results in a kind of audiovisual collage that draws attention to the film form itself—inspired by Latinx artists like Lourdes Portillo and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Rivera embraces “the mixing, matching, sampling of fiction, science fiction, and documentary,” and has “never been faithful to any one medium. I’m drawn to the collage,” as he states in an interview (Aldama 157). This approach not only destabilizes the porous boundaries between genres but also calls upon the viewer to question techniques of visibility and visualization, posing questions about who is allowed to envision a future reality and who is forced to merely live someone else’s past speculations. Expanding upon Jennifer Lozano’s characterization of Rivera’s work as “digital rasquachismo,” or a networked form of multimedia storytelling that resourcefully repurposes a variety of digital material (267), I draw upon Donna Haraway’s posthumanist cyborg theory along with other critiques of visibility, as well as scholarship on diasporic cinema, to develop what I term “rasquache cyborg visibility.” If, as Haraway suggests, the cyborg is a figure who transgresses boundaries in contradictory and

fluid “illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (176) which enables survival through recombination, its politics are aligned with *rasquachismo*’s irreverent and resourceful intermixing. Underscoring the dangers of technological-organic fusions insofar as they enable a surveillant and exploitative visuality, the film also locates a subversive and pleasurable potential in a visuality that is networked and embodied. *Sleep Dealer*’s rasquache cyborg vision is thus mediated by both the body and technology, encouraging a mode of film viewership that questions an ungrounded, all-seeing vision and that dwells in material, felt connections, even if they are uncomfortable or contradictory. It is a view from the swarm that unsettles and recombines hegemonic visual regimes and refuses essentializing stances and identities.

“Rasquachismo” is a term first introduced within academia by Chicano art scholar Tomás Ybarra Frausto, and it has been an influential concept for both Latinx and Chicanx art practices. A key feature of rasquachismo is that it emerges as a “visceral response to lived reality, not an intellectual cognition” (Ybarra-Frausto 1). This attunement to the lived body is central to rasquache cyborg visuality, and it contributes to the destabilization of imposed epistemologies that restrict marginalized bodies within particular visual and affective frames. José Esteban Muñoz draws from Raymond Williams’ notion of “structures of feeling” to frame his analysis of Latinx theater and performance, arguing that “what unites and consolidates oppositional groups is not simply the fact of identity but the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to an official national affect that is aligned with a hegemonic class” (9). Muñoz describes how under the dominant national sphere of “white” affect, most ethnic affects are read as inappropriate, and often excessive. “Feeling brown” therefore becomes an important aspect of Latinx performance that serves to critique the “underdeveloped and impoverished” white affect (11). Expressions of Latinx emotions and affects (Muñoz does not distinguish between the two)

are necessarily social negotiations of the “very material and felt obstacles that suddenly surface in their own mappings of the world” (13). Following Muñoz, I wish to explore the ways in which Rivera’s film exposes this emotional mapping, particularly the intertwining of pleasurable and painful emotions within the struggle against techno-capitalist dominance from a Latinx positionality⁶. Whereas the majoritarian culture often frames migrants as sad or tragic (they are poor, they are displaced, they are besieged by crime and violence, etc.) *Sleep Dealer*’s protagonist Memo performs the radical gesture of experiencing pleasure through the very technology that serves his oppressors. In so doing, he refuses the reductive depictions of the Latinx experience in popular media in which subjects are represented as either tragic or overtly aggressive (in the form of criminality or hypersexuality)⁷. Furthermore, the film’s focus on non-hierarchical relational networks above an individual character’s transformation illustrates a cyborg *rasquache* politics and aesthetics which extends from the narrative to the experience of film viewership itself; the viewer is drawn into a *rasquache* cyborg visuality which foregrounds embodied, felt experience as integral to understanding the interlinking of nature, technology, and human existence.

Attending to emotion and embodiment in cinema through a posthumanist methodology allows for an understanding of film viewership that does not organize our perceptive capabilities within a hierarchy in which embodied and felt knowledge is inferior, given the importance of sense experience for the recognition of the body’s interrelatedness with other bodies. This is

⁶ I concur with Muñoz that “Latino/a/x” does not index a particular identity or experience with any coherence, however, also like Muñoz, I agree that it has served, and continues to serve, important political functions. Yet my central justification for using this term throughout this chapter lies in its importance for Alex Rivera, who espouses a clear commitment to Latinx as a political/social movement, as demonstrated by his larger oeuvre and his various talks and interviews—Rivera consistently uses the term as a symbol of shared “transborder” liminality, both a marginalized identity and one under which to organize and form solidarity movements (see Aldama).

⁷ For an extensive analysis of stereotypical representations of Latinx and Chicanx identity in film and popular media, see *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance*, by Charles Ramirez Berg.

particularly relevant for diasporic subjects, as Laura Marks notes in her scholarship on “intercultural cinema,” and films that evoke physical sensations linked to cultural memory can become vital resources for those who are displaced or exiled. *Sleep Dealer*’s cyborg aesthetics thus aim to evoke a “sense of brown” that is relational, cultural, and exceeds the dichotomous logic (and “impoverished affect”) of the dominant order. Further, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, the film extends its vision beyond the human to incorporate non-human entities—namely, Mesoamerican foods, water, and machine-human hybrids.

Sleep Dealer is set in a near-future dystopia on the border between Mexico and the United States, a dark, gritty, cyberpunk world of techno-capitalist dominance. The border is completely walled off and heavily secured, but inhabitants of the Mexican border towns can sell their virtual labor by acquiring special implants called “nodes” that enable them to plug in to machines installed in the “sleep-dealer” (essentially futuristic virtual labor *maquiladoras*, or duty- and tariff- free factories owned by multinational corporations) and operate drones anywhere in the U.S. (becoming a restaurant worker, construction worker, farmworker, etc.). They can thus become “cybraceros,” a new virtual-reality version of a “bracero,” referencing the farm labor program established in 1942 that allowed millions of Mexicans to work in the U.S. on short-term labor contracts. The “cybraceros,” as opposed to the “braceros,” never physically enter the U.S., and thus their labor is separated from their bodies, eliminating the physical threat of the other for U.S. society and allegorizing the largely invisible presence of migrant labor in the U.S. The protagonist, Memo (Luis Fernando Peña), travels to Tijuana from the southern state of Oaxaca to become a node worker after a Mexican-American drone pilot named Rudy Ramirez (Jacob Vargas) kills his father and destroys his home, thinking that Memo’s father is a “water-terrorist” (challenging U.S. monopoly) when Memo’s homemade radio system accidentally

intercepts classified transmissions. En route, Memo meets Luz (Leonor Varela), a writer who has nodes herself. She installs nodes for Memo, and the two begin a relationship, during which Luz secretly uploads her memories of Memo through a technology called TruNode, an online market that traffics in personal memories using the same technology as that used by the “sleep dealers” for labor extraction. The buyer for Luz’s memories of Memo turns out to be Rudy, who, struck with remorse for the killing of Memo’s father, wants to track down Memo to atone for his violent actions. The three cyborg-bodied characters eventually come together to rebel against the militarized water corporation by using their technological capabilities to commandeer a drone and destroy the corporation’s dam in Santa Ana del Río, Oaxaca, Memo’s hometown. As China Medel observes,

Using the same node technologies enabling the violent transnationalization of labor and the militarization of daily life, they repurpose memory, their labor power, and the privatized markets and networks through which they circulate in an act of collective futurity, thus ensuring the survival and autonomy of the community of Santa Ana del Rio.

Their act is not about avenging the past but... forging a future. (Medel 115)

The notion of embodied relationality that is disrupted by the technology that both weaponizes and disconnects humans, alienating us from our own bodies and those of others, is central to this film. However, the “act of collective futurity” at the end of the film is not one which seeks to destroy technology, but one in which cyborg bodies make use of technology in order to create new forms of connection based on memory, emotion, and vulnerability.

The film also utilizes various techniques to displace and disorient the viewer’s sense of his or her own body, provoking an embodied response that encourages a seeing-otherwise. In the opening sequence, for example, the first few images flash onto the screen as blurry shapes of

neon blues and greens which resolve into a series of wires and tubes. We then see a sequence of shots first of Memo's head connected to machinery, his eyes clouded over, reminiscent of a ghost or a zombie, and then his hands, which move to lift and carry invisible things. A shot of Memo's wide unseeing eyes dissolves into a blurred and wavering image of women in what we will realize later is his (fictional) village of Santa Ana del Río in Oaxaca. The following medium shot of Memo is suddenly in slow-motion, he closes his eyes and then we see again what he sees: blurred images of indeterminate objects that first appear to be tinged with blood, then are seen as if through water. By interspersing these images with shots of Memo plugged in to various wires, and by including voiceover narration, we are meant to infer that these blurred images are what Memo sees in his semi-hallucinatory state. However, the camera eye extends our gaze as viewers and initiates us into a form of seeing that filters objective reality through memory, and through a body made vulnerable by the machines it ravages. For Memo, the same technology that disconnects him from his home and his family also allows for a different kind of seeing—one which extends his perception outward and connects it with other cyborg bodies, creating a form of intersubjective knowledge based on shared embodied experiences.

Visibility, Virtuality, and Migrant Cyborg Visuality

Sleep Dealer plays with and undermines the late 20th century's celebratory discourse of a futurist "global village" in cyberspace, wherein physical barriers are inconsequential, and race is a bygone concept. Instead, cyberspace becomes a disciplinary space of knowledge that otherizes Mexican laboring bodies, erasing their humanity from an Anglocentric and corporatist positionality. In the short web video "Why Cybraceros?" made by Rivera in 1997 that would become the seed for *Sleep Dealer*, real documentary footage of the farmworker labor rights

movement in the 1960s is cut together with animated sequences and a voiceover describing a fictional “Cybracero” program which is designed to solve the problem of increasing demands for farmworker labor. The video examines the notion that human laborers, although they can perform skilled tasks that cannot be done by machines, pose a threat through their existence as humans who demand rights. The Cybracero program promises that “American farm labor will be accomplished on American soil” but “only the labor of Mexicans will cross the border” (02:52 – 03:10) through the use of robotic farmworkers operated by Mexicans from their homes in Mexico; it is “all the labor without the worker” (04:00). The video ends with a shot of a young, very blonde girl with a pink ribbon in her hair drinking a glass of orange juice, presumably made with oranges picked by “cybraceros,” footage that was borrowed from a real Tropicana orange juice commercial. The blonde American girl is oblivious to the conditions that made her juice consumption possible—the laboring migrant bodies that produced that juice are invisibilized not only as the means of production, but also as part of the American consumerist class. Rivera here blends science fiction and documentary genres in a manner that mirrors the disorienting inconsistencies experienced by bodies of color in a world of burgeoning virtuality. The short video illustrates the paradox between the early digital era’s ecstatic embrace of the freedom of movement afforded by computers, and the policing of brown bodies already seen as “out of place”.

Expanding upon this notion of invisible labor, the feature-length *Sleep Dealer* imagines a dystopian near future in which cyborg “node workers” are forced to seek exploitative employment due to militarized violence in their home communities. The node workers for the Cybraceros company in the film recall real-world services such as the Amazon Mechanical Turk or “MTurk” (which was publicly launched in 2005), a crowdsourcing website that enables

businesses to hire remotely located workers to perform on-demand tasks that computers are unable to do, or that are less cost effective. Sherryl Vint draws upon the work of scholars Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski to note that services like this one “promote an imaginary that dehumanizes workers of color. They are made doubly invisible, as both the labor-power that continues to do much of the work promoted as automated via such apps and as a disenfranchised population facing precarity due to loss of income” (Vint 16). The possibilities for consumption thus provided to the neoliberal subject on the north side of the border are enabled by those who are excluded from the realm of the human: the “racialized subject who cannot transform self into an enterprise, who is understood not as a subject at all but simply a reservoir of labor-power available for use by others” (Vint 16). The bodies of the node workers, transformed into robotic machines on the northern side of the border, are not legible as humans to those in the United States, but only as extraction sites. The drone labor made possible through the “sleep dealers” invisibilizes the real labor of migrant bodies, which raises questions about vision itself as the only reliable source of knowledge. Embodied memory becomes a valuable resource in this fictional world, as an alternative to what is captured through surveillance technology. Here I follow Laura Marks’ proposal that “vision” can be considered a continuum that moves from instrumental and objectifying on one end, to non-instrumental and intersubjective on the other. The point is not to condemn all visuality as a form of control, but to open up “a form of visuality that yields to the thing seen, a vision that is not merely cognitive but acknowledges its location in the body” and therefore does not seek mastery over other bodies (132). The film critiques surveillant, objectifying vision that is isolated from embodied sense perception, from the tactile and kinesthetic, aiming to deconstruct the hegemonic alignment of objective vision with

knowledge in favor of perception that requires an active “engagement with individual and cultural memory” (Marks 147) mediated by bodily sensations.

Drawing attention to the constructed nature of the visible within a militarized regime that invests in making its citizen-subjects “see” in certain ways, the film posits affective alliances enabled by the same technology as an oppositional mode of envisioning resistance. This is exemplified by an early scene when a military drone attacks Memo’s home and kills his father, which Memo and his brother David learn about through watching the television show *Drone!* at the house of a friend. In the television episode, we are introduced to Rudy as a “rookie drone pilot” who works for the Del Rio Water company, with its headquarters in San Diego. Memo, David, and the film audience watch Rudy track the signal coming from the homemade satellite radio at Memo’s house, utilizing “fly-eyes”, or remotely operated cameras that fly alongside his drone in order to “see every angle of the action” (14:36), and as Rudy gets closer, Memo and his brother realize the house that is about to be destroyed is their own. On the television, Rudy’s drone shoots the house, and the “fly-eye” follows Memo’s wounded father as he stumbles out of a doorway, then zooms in to his bloodied face and captures the drone’s final killing blow. The multiple screens (the movie viewing screen, the fictional television screen, and the “fly-eye” camera) compound to make this moment hyper-visible, yet the viewer knows that the murder of Memo’s father is based on negligible “intelligence” and racial profiling, therefore the visual evidence of this elimination of a “terrorist intercept” is only surface-level.

In opposition to this hyper-visible violence of the drone technology, TruNode becomes the means for Memo to forge connections with Luz, and through her, to Rudy. Although initially Luz is paid by Rudy for secretly transmitting her memories of Memo, she also uses the nodes to enhance the pleasurable bodily and emotional experience of sex, creating embodied memory-

images. Memo learns to see (and along with him, the film audience) what lies outside these boundaries of the visible when he produces memories as somatic experiences, connecting with other bodies and with nature. Medel notes the dichotomy between these two node technologies in the film, military drones and TruNode, and observes that while the latter is a platform that captures memories to be sold in the memory market, it also becomes a platform that “[enables] insurgent alliance and resistance,” and “the bodies that are made to disappear by *Drones* and the labor of the sleep dealers reappear within TruNode’s flesh of memory and images” (117).

Calling attention to the textures of vision and the feelings and physiological responses associated with memory, the film is attuned both narratively and aesthetically to the limits of visual archives and ocularcentric knowledge. Sight alone does not equate to knowledge, rather it is perception understood as imbricated with the body’s other senses that enables access to collective cultural memory. Just after Rudy kills Memo’s father with the drone, the camera cuts back to Rudy, whose pilot helmet lends him a robot-like visage, with two red, machinic “eyes” that glow within a black metallic helmet. The next shot is ambiguous: a blur of red and blue pulsating lights and shapes that swirl together, then fade to darkness. Read together, these two shots indicate Rudy’s physiological and emotional response to the violence that he has just carried out, an impact that cannot be verbalized or discerned in explicit images (see fig. 1). As viewers we are suddenly in Rudy’s cyborg world, seeing/feeling a strange discomfort approximating what is seen/felt when one presses one’s fingers on one’s own closed eyelids. This last shot is an almost exact replication of the shot towards the beginning of the film I have already discussed in this chapter’s introduction, wherein Memo, plugged into the sleep dealer’s machinery, delves into his memory of his home village and what led him to the present moment. These two characters are thus

shown to mirror one another's experiences, connected through their affective responses to the violent technology that depletes their material bodies and forces a hegemonic vision upon them.

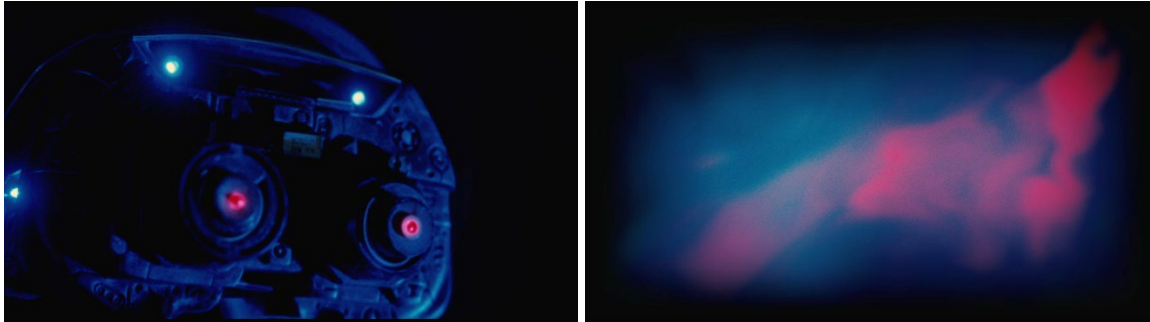


Figure 1. Rudy's response to the murder of Memo's father.

Despite the potentially exploitative pitfalls for migrant and diasporic subjects that emerge when engaging with the virtual world, there are also clear benefits. As Ella Shohat affirms, Interactive media disperse the hegemony of nation-states through virtual proximity, enabling exilic communities to share, teach, and inform beyond the often unbearable familial devastations. Whereas cyberspace allows for the creation of interactive communities of strangers, it can also empower the diasporized to overcome the estrangement of displacement. (227)

Although I question whether the “estrangement of displacement” can or should be entirely overcome, I agree that media is a way for communities in diaspora to reach one another as well as maintain a sense of rootedness in a “home” country (as when, for example, during video calls with my grandmother in Cuba she turned her camera to show me the tree branches in her yard touching the ground, bent by the weight of ripe mangoes, opening a tropical window within my grey and rainy Pacific Northwest home). But beyond this, what Homi K. Bhabha terms the “exilic optic” defamiliarizes the very idea of home, or what is deemed to be “familiar, domestic, national, homely” (xi). In a lecture given by Alex Rivera during the “Latinx Visions” conference

in March of 2023 at the University of New Mexico, titled “Artificial Intelligence and *Rasquache* Futures,” Rivera describes his evolving awareness of science fiction as an avenue for exploring metaphors about the im/migrant experience, in which so often connections to a homeland are maintained and mediated via technology. Describing his early film experiments, such as the short video titled “Papapapá” Rivera notes that “virtual reality was a way to visualize ‘third space’ between North and South, a reflection of a migrant mind-space” (01:09). As Bhabha, Hamid Naficy, and other theorists have demonstrated, the diasporic experience occasions a disturbance in one’s sense of space and time, and a resulting disruption to one’s sense of truth, especially when confronted with a hegemonic power that forcefully imposes its epistemologies (such as when crossing the border, a migrant is suddenly marked as an ‘alien’). Under these conditions, the “migrant mind-space” becomes an alternative mode of perception which sees doubly, a layering of one world upon the other. The means for maintaining a connection to a non-dominant culture often involve technology of various kinds—email, digital photos, and more recently video calling—which shapes that connection in complex ways. Rivera’s audiovisual art engages this dimension of experience in his speculative explorations of the virtual realm and how it is maneuvered by migrants. Confronted with the one-dimensional ocularcentrism of hegemonic institutions like policing and the military, which aim to flatten the humanity of migrants into a hard surface stamped as Other, the characters in *Sleep Dealer* transform visuality and virtuality into experiences of the flesh, enabling an embodied and networked understanding of history and futurity.

In its depiction of the all-seeing “fly-eyes” which swoop in to frame and violently target brown bodies without accountability, the film illustrates Nicholas Mirzoeff’s notion of a post-

panoptic visuality, in which the origin of the surveillance is unknown, and the person or entity performing the surveillance is invisible. As Mirzoeff notes,

A digitally enabled military, using surveillance and information as its primary tools, seeks to dominate culture using a networked leadership, in patterns set by imperial regimes, that is invisible to those led. Unlike the Panopticon or plantation, the place of surveillance is not just invisible, but unknown, what one might call its undisclosed location. This is post-panoptic visuality for a new era, a neovisuality enabled by global digital technology that nonetheless understands itself to be part of a centuries-old tradition. (294)

For Mirzoeff, asserting the “right to look” is a way for the subject to counteract neovisuality, as an insistence upon its locatedness and historical precedence. Yet I argue that this film’s fleshy memory-images and sometimes pleasurable encounters between human bodies and the natural world, mediated by technology, offer something other than a spotlight on the source of neovisuality. Instead, they provide opportunities for seeing otherwise with a cyborg visuality that draws upon cultural memory and feelings to bridge past and future, self and other. In this way *Sleep Dealer* does more than seize the right to look under the terms established by corporations and the state—instead it disrupts this way of seeing altogether.

In her essay “The Persistence of Vision,” Donna Haraway similarly identifies the ways in which the visual sense has been weaponized by dominant masculinist culture, in particular by the military and scientific spheres, but she proposes what I interpret as an alternative to Mirzoeff’s suggestion to seize the “right to look”. Because the masculinist “knowing subject” is disembodied and distanced from what it visualizes, making it “infinitely mobile,” (677) Haraway suggests that a radically embodied, “situated knowledge” is called for under current regimes of

visuality (which have only become more alarmingly invisible and embedded since the late 1980s, when Haraway's essay was published). This type of knowledge, far from simple relativism, is "partial, locatable, critical [knowledge] sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (680). Speaking particularly to Western feminist scholars working in the humanities and sciences, Haraway reminds us not to rest uncritically on certain identities as enabling an intrinsic ability to see well, but to proceed as split and contradictory selves that constantly interrogate the world:

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, *to see together without claiming to be another*. (681, emphasis mine)

Rivera's cyborgs are imperfect, as is their vision, and the vision of the film as a whole. Indeed, the "Latinx" identity category itself is imperfectly stitched together⁸. The contradictory and partial aesthetic of the film emerges from weaving specific real-world settings (the Oaxaca valley, Tijuana, and the border wall) with globally recognizable science fiction elements (including clear references to films like *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and *Star Wars*). As a low-budget, cobbled-together audiovisual artwork that emphasizes fluid and relational forms of memory and historical knowledge that circumvent fixed ocularcentric epistemologies on a narrative and aesthetic level, *Sleep Dealer* is also an insurgent art object that evolved out of a hybrid process of hand drawing and digital artistic rendering set to a soundtrack of stolen copyrighted music⁹. The film thus operationalizes a kind of Harawayan situated knowledge,

⁸ As Muñoz notes, "While important political spectacles have been staged under group identity titles such as Chicano and Nuyorican, Latino, a term meant to enable much-needed coalitions between different national groups, has not developed as an umbrella term that unites cultural and political activists across different national, racial, class, and gender divides... if a Latino can be from any country in Latin America, a member of any race, religion, class, or gender or sex orientation, who then is she?" (8).

⁹ Rivera explains this process in a short documentary posted to YouTube titled "Before the Making of Sleep Dealer" (2012).

inviting the audience to observe and question dominant visualizations of Global North-South relations and the colonial ordering of bodies in which they are entirely separate and knowable entities. It critiques the powers that structure technologies of visibility, and it repositions vision as only one among other sensory operations involved in creating networks of connection in which we can “see together without claiming to be another.”

Rasquache Cyborg Embodiment

Memo is a willing participant in this dystopic extractive economy, but he is not left with many other choices that will ensure the survival of his family. At the same time, his nodes provide him not only with earning potential, but also the possibility for pleasurable sexual and romantic involvement with Luz. The film’s message of resistance is not one which promotes straightforward refusal, but which emerges from a complex mix of rebellion and complicity in line with Ecuadorian philosopher Bolivar Echeverría’s notion of the Latin American “ethos barroco” or “baroque ethos”. M. Elizabeth Ginway analyzes the “unnatural” (gender-fluid, cyborg, and living-dead or undead) bodies central to Latin American speculative texts beginning as early as the 1840s and up to the present and draws upon Echeverría’s concept of the “baroque ethos” as a framework that can be applied to understanding the unique treatment of the body in Mexican and Brazilian speculative fiction. According to Echeverría, the subaltern classes of Latin American societies have developed this “baroque ethos” as a set of strategies and attitudes that enable them to survive “on the margins of capitalism” (Ginway 11). Importantly, it is “both conservative and nonconformist” (11)—that is, it neither denies nor attempts to reject outright the reality of life under capitalist modernity, but it resists full acceptance of and conformity to this system. Ginway applies this baroque ethos framework to argue that the unnatural, altered

bodies in fiction represent the way in which groups within the body politic both accommodate and resist control by Latin American neoliberal states. Just as in the literary texts examined by Ginway, Rivera's cinematic cyborg "...does not ultimately lead to a facile sense of mixture of mestizaje or new beginnings, but rather to negotiations of citizenship and identity in a complex world of baroque posthuman resistance" (Ginway 68). *Sleep Dealer's* imperfect vision proceeds from precisely this negotiation of technology as both a source of oppression and a medium for embodied connection, not rejecting techno-capitalism outright but only its fixing of surface identities and linear time; it maneuvers technology to expand the realm of the "migrant mind-space," providing a corporeal dimension and a sense of cyclical time that creates, as Memo discovers at the end, "a future with a past" (01:23:34).

In Rivera's 2023 lecture, he discusses the history of the term *rasquache* in Chicana art and aesthetics and its impact on his own filmmaking. He cites Mexican-American scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's essay titled "Rasquachismo: a Chicano sensibility," which contains notes toward outlining this concept (while intentionally avoiding an explicit definition). The essence of *rasquache* is an artistic sensibility that emerges from the bicultural lived experience of Chicanas, an outsider attitude adopted by this social underclass that responds to the need for survival with material resourcefulness. Visually, *rasquache* aesthetics opt for the flamboyant over the subdued, with bright colors and patterns and "a delight for texture and sensuous surface" (6). Broadly, "*rasquachismo* is a sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence. Communion is preferred over purity" (6), and in this way it is also connected to the concept of the "ethos barroco". According to Echeverría via Ginway, the baroque ethos, as developed by Latin American subaltern groups, "contests capitalism's strict definition of profit by suggesting a method of navigating and negotiating social reality in such a way as to avoid direct conflict or confrontation with the

powers that be, while pursuing social survival and economic advantage” (11). Both *rasquachismo* and the baroque ethos, therefore, are strategies that confront dominant powers through a defiance of capitalist efficiency and irreverence towards fixed structures and traditions, and at the same time seek survival through syncretism, rebellious recombination, and “codigofagia” or “code-eating”, a term coined by Echeverría (Ginway 12). According to Rivera, the production of *Sleep Dealer* was a *rasquache* process, arrived at through a method of borrowing and recycling images and sounds, and financially supported by non-profit arts organizations and universities. At the same time, it is also *rasquache* in its themes and aesthetics: characters commune with one another and the world through various technologies that serve to both oppress and connect, in a dystopian science fiction setting rooted in present border politics. The flashy science fiction elements, representing a range of influences from Hollywood movies to contemporary Chicanofuturist art such as that of Guillermo Gómez Peña, demonstrate precisely this kind of “code-eating” which fundamentally rewrites the genre and critiques the xenophobia that formed the basis of much canonical science fiction cinema.

Ginway also underscores the echoes of Donna Haraway’s famous feminist cyborg within Echeverría’s notion of baroque ethos as a mechanism of survival within a system of capitalist domination. In her 1991 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Haraway proposes the cyborg as a new feminist construct with radical possibilities for banishing hierarchical dichotomies between male and female, human and animal, organism and machine. Haraway’s cyborg myth “is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” and calls for a shift in perspective in order to envision a world of “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (154). Haraway highlights in particular the work of

Chicana scholars Chela Sandoval, who developed the notion of an “oppositional consciousness,” and Cherrie Moraga. Their work allows Haraway to consider women of color feminism (or what we might today call intersectional feminism) as a paradigmatic cyborg identity, conceived as “a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities” (174) including race, gender, and class. Storytelling is crucial for colonized groups not as a way to maintain a claim to some original, whole, legitimate identity, but as a constant struggle for “the power to signify,” to survive “not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (175). While it does not directly confront issues of gender, *Sleep Dealer* makes the cyborg metaphor literal, and its potent fusions of body/machine, the virtual and the material, reveal the true subversive potential of the science fiction genre in the hands of Latinx and Chicana artists.

The Chicana (or Chicano/a/e) identity marker is itself a contradictory positionality that defamiliarizes dominant viewpoints, draws upon a collective history, and at the same time calls for a radically different future—or as Ernest Hogan puts it, “Chicano is a science fiction state of being” (406). The image of an agentic Mexican cyborg body that seizes the tools created for the subjection of his body for purposes not only of insurgency, but of bodily pleasure, is a surprising and powerful image that disturbs colonial science fiction tropes that pit the “primitive” and deficient subaltern against the technologically advanced and abundant “modern” society. Memo’s use of the node technology not only makes visible the ongoing violence against and exploitation of migrants, but also creates moments of joy and pleasure that disturb the boundaries established by the dichotomous logic of what Walter D. Mignolo terms “the modern/colonial world system.” In this way, Alex Rivera’s project (although he himself is half Peruvian, not Mexican-American) is closely aligned with previous and contemporary Chicana visual art that harnesses a

“speculative rasquache sensibility,” as Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson contends in her analysis of the Chican@futurist collaborative “Project MASA.” This type of art aims to create “altermundos” or alternate worlds which “directly assault colonial regimes of the visual” (354) and which “cleave and disintegrate sedimented binaries—the bulwark of colonial ordering—and simultaneously reassemble a utopian outlook grounded in the here and now” (359). Similarly, *Sleep Dealer* does not present us with a completely imaginary world in which political concerns appear as suggestive undertones, as does a film like *The Matrix* (1999)¹⁰, rather its *rasquache* cyborg visuality helps us to see the present conditions of migrant labor more clearly, and at the same time it illustrates a present complexly interwoven with a potential future—a “future with a past” that retains possibilities for hope and solidarities based on collective, embodied perception.

When Luz and Memo have sex, they connect through their nodes, and it is here that they are able to deeply “see” one another. As Luz says, “if there’s one thing that nodes are good for, it’s to break that distance – to connect us, to let us see one another” (56:07). As they touch physically, they begin to share images of personal memories, asking one another “can you see?” (56:58). Their intimacy is visual, emotional, and physical. The border wall, which is represented in a shared vision, and which they visit in the scene immediately after, becomes a metaphor for that which prevents connection. Within the dystopian setting of the film, in which militarized technology is deployed to contain, kill, or extract labor from brown bodies, there is no place for pleasure outside of what citizen-subjects on the northern side of the border might enjoy at the expense of the southern laboring bodies. Every experience is transactional and nothing exists

¹⁰ Memo’s nodes are reminiscent of the technology imagined in *The Matrix*, a canonical “cyberpunk” sci-fi film: hardware installed in the characters’ bodies that allow them to awaken into avatars in a simulated world (called The Matrix). Whereas in *The Matrix*, humans are given this simulation to prevent them from discovering that they are in fact bodies kept in stasis and fed to robot overlords, in *Sleep Dealer*, the bodies of the node workers provide invisible labor for drones on the other side of the border, maintaining an illusion for U.S. citizens that skyscrapers are being built by drones and not humans. The simulation exists, but it is only for those on the North side of the border – the illusion that there is no material cost to bodies for the labor of farming, construction, etc.

outside of capitalist exchange, from the exploitation taking place in the sleep dealers to the buying and selling of one's personal memories. When Luz and Memo have sex, however, they experience physical pleasure as they literally and figuratively expose themselves to one another, sharing memories of their childhoods and important moments in their lives. Connected in this way, they "see" but are not visualizable to corporate entities; the movements of their bodies blend and blur together with interspersed visions that they share. This mode of seeing and feeling subverts the "classifying, separating, and aestheticizing" modalities of what Mirzoeff terms the "complex of visibility" (4). Memo and Luz perform an affective difference that opposes itself to the hyper-visibility of the affect-less drones, surveillance cameras, and televisions. At the same time, even their sexual pleasure is infused with politics—Luz shares a vision of herself running alongside the border wall as a child during the intimate act—suggesting that the conditions of possibility for intimate pleasurable connection lies in the elimination of barriers and political oppression. Physical pleasure, memory, and hope all intermingle in the act of sex, connecting it to a larger sense of time and a broader community, beyond a single moment experienced by two individuals.

Posthuman Milpas and Postcolonial Superheroes

Sleep Dealer connects questions specifically relevant to migrant and diasporic communities to broader concerns beginning to be examined by posthumanist scholars at the turn of the millennium—namely, the critique or deconstruction of the entrenched humanist conception of human beings as essentially exceptional and rational beings separate from the rest of the natural world. The rise of feminist posthumanist critique (work by scholars such as Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Zakiyyah Jackson, Astrid Neimanis, Stacy Alaimo, and others) has

created a framework for an ethical approach to rethinking the human that aims to collapse hierarchies between humans and other organisms while not flattening the differing experiences and challenges of bodies (under heteropatriarchy, racism, ableism, etc.). As Neimanis states, “a feminist posthumanism is a deeply ethical orientation. The kinds of ontologies it inaugurates – connected, indebted, dispersed, relational – are not only about correcting a phallogocentric understanding of bodies, but also about developing imaginaries that might allow us to relate differently” (11). The interdependence of various bodies—humans and machines, humans and bodies of water, food and the beings that produce and consume it—is at the heart of this film, and its cyborg vision is focused on recognizing the “dispersed vulnerability” that feminist posthumanism understands to be essential to our collective survival (16).

This reliance on networks for survival is a lesson more immediately present for im/migrants than for perhaps any other group, as is made clear by the interconnected entities of extended families, remittances, government officials, coyotes, activists who set water and food along key routes, etc. that are activated in every border crossing. Yet, alongside this serious understanding of networked survival, *Sleep Dealer* also takes undeniable pleasure in its cyborg intermingling of flashy sci-fi maneuvers with weighty border politics, and in illustrating the permeability of the species boundary. There is a certain glee in watching the hijacked drone deftly cruise through the river canyon, so reminiscent of the Rebel force’s mission to destroy the Death Star in the first *Star Wars* film (a film Rivera has described as “a story of migration”)¹¹, and the screened vision of liberated water flowing through the broken wall of the dam provides a

¹¹ “I’ve only seen *Star Wars* as a story of migration. Luke Skywalker is a peasant farmer whose house is destroyed by an imperial army, and who then goes on the run. He has to go through border check-points and make deals with human smugglers. It’s the story of someone who is, in many ways, a war refugee who’s uprooted and tossed out into the galaxy. But at its core it has a lot in common with the cinema of migration.”
<https://crossedgenres.com/archives/024-charactersofcolor/interview-alex-rivera/>

pleasurable intermingling of human, non-human, and technological matters. Just as in much Latinx speculative fiction, as discussed by Gabriela Nuñez, the film's ending suggests that the regenerative farming practices of Mesoamerican cultures provides "a hopeful antidote to social ills" (236) in stark contrast to the techno-capitalist approach to violent and unsustainable resource extraction¹². These practices become a way for Latinx communities to ground, connect, and thrive both materially and metaphorically, just as "the beans wrap around the corn and the plants help each other to grow" in the *milpa*, as Luz excitedly repeats to Memo from something she has read (48:22).

In the film's climactic moment, when the drone (piloted by Rudy as Memo and Luz look on) is approaching the imposing wall of the dam, the action slows, and the camera moves in on Memo's face as he closes his eyes. Suddenly we are in his imagination, and the screen shows Memo's father from behind in a long shot as he throws a rock at the dam, followed by a slow-motion close-up of the rock approaching the solid brown dam wall (1:21:13). As it hits, there is a loud explosive sound, followed by silence, then the sound of a ringing bell accompanied by a shout of "Agua! (Water!)" (1:21:26), but the actual explosion of the dam is never shown. As viewers we are led to understand that the dam has been destroyed by the drone, but also that for Memo it is as if his father's rock has been the agent of change. After the dam's destruction, Memo places a video call to his mother and brother back in Santa Ana del Río, and they answer looking happy and smiling (1:21:32), a stark contrast to the earlier video call we witnessed where the brother is bereaved and angry at Memo for leaving. Memo's mother (Metztli Adamina) tells him "Es un milagro (it's a miracle)" that the water has returned, and Memo's brother (played by

¹² Although this is also an uneasy and contradictory stance, given the "constant co-optation of indigenous ideologies" (Nuñez 237) by non-indigenous authors, scholars, artists, and activists. For more analysis on the erasure of indigenous experience on the border, see Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez, *Unspeakable Violence*.

Tenoch Huerta, who later went on to play Namor, a key role in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) takes the video communication device outside to gleefully show Memo the water gushing out of the break in the dam. He zooms in, making the water take up the entire screen, and in a reverse close-up Memo beams. The next shot shows Memo from behind, gazing at the three large screens surrounding him from which water continues to gush and flow, and the camera pans slowly from right to left as the water seems almost to swallow up Memo's figure and the sound of the river envelops him. Just as in an earlier scene Memo and Luz made their memories flesh through their nodes, here the body of water (magnified through the screens) seems almost to become sentient, and its presence and materiality are made immediate by the screen, as is the fluid connection between the past and present. The screens enable a sense of thirst-quenching, life-giving abundance spilling across borders. Borders are of course meaningless for water, which seeps through cracks both visible and invisible, and which sustains all organic bodies. Water holds memory in the sense that it is chemically altered by what passes through it, and in a similar way, a film itself is marked by the audiences by which it is witnessed. Both bodies of water and film-bodies have the capacity to invade and permeate, challenging the separateness of bodies, cultures, and nations.

This sense of radical interrelatedness is partly what sets *Sleep Dealer* apart from other "cyborg cinema," the focus of much critical posthumanities scholarship due to the powerful fascination elicited by this subgenre's questioning of the boundaries of the human; its focus is on networks and the social, rather than with an individual cyborg body in the vein of *RoboCop* or *Blade Runner*, or even later films like *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2014). It is less concerned with expressing anxiety about the status of the human, and more concerned with networks (inclusive of nonhuman actors), connection/intimacy, surveillance, memory, and migration. By making all

three of its central characters cyborgs (humans with technologically altered bodies), *Sleep Dealer* expands the boundaries of the cyborg cinema subgenre. The triad of Memo, Luz, and Rudy subverts the trope of the cyborg as either a villain (like the Terminator) or a tragic hero (like RoboCop or the “replicant” in *Blade Runner*), and instead the evil is clearly located in the corporate militarism. Additionally, the rebellion against the evil water corporation does not provide a clearly resolved ending. In the end, although the dam is destroyed, there is no assurance that it will not be rebuilt, or that Memo’s home village will not continue to be repressed by the corporation, or that the system of sleep dealers will be eliminated. The ambiguous ending leaves us only with the understanding that the individual, and even the family unit, are less important than the well-being of the broader community, on behalf of which Memo feels called to continue to fight. This well-being is shown to be intimately connected with the sustainable care of, and access to, the shared resources of water and the plants cultivated in the *milpa*.

Sleep Dealer’s cyborgs deviate from the U.S. cinematic science fiction tradition in other ways as well: the cyborg node workers are not “good” or “bad” insofar as they approximate full humanity¹³, rather, in a world full of human-machine hybrids, morality is determined by one’s actions towards other bodies, including the natural world, and the extent to which one can achieve true “connection”. After the dam is destroyed, Memo does not return to Santa Ana. Instead, he creates a *milpa* in the shanty where he lives in Tijuana, creating a life “en la orilla de todo” (on the edge of everything)” (1:23:24). We see him carrying buckets of water along the border, then watering plants. An image of seedlings pushing through the earth on Luz’s computer fades to a picture of the canal where he and Luz first kissed, which is then overlaid with an

¹³ For more on “good cyborgs” vs. “bad cyborgs” as a reflection of U.S. racial politics, see Nishime, LeiLani.

image that could be either a neural net or plant roots. Echoing his father's words to him at the beginning of the film, Memo speaks of "un futuro con un pasado, si me conecto, y lucho (a future with a past, if I connect, and fight)" (1:23:43). The final shot is an upward tilt of the camera moving from Memo's patch of earth along the border wall to the sky at sunset, while it begins to rain. These last few shots and the voiceover narration suggest the importance of "connection" particularly as it relates to land—the only possible future is one in which the material connections between humans and between humans and land must be foregrounded. Memo has learned to "see" these connections, circumventing "post-panoptic visibility's" attempts to obscure this type of vision and channel it into what the military and techno-capitalism want him to see—that the means for connection can only be bought and sold, not felt. Instead, the triad comprised of Memo, Luz and Rudy begin to understand themselves as feeling bodies enmeshed in a network of other bodies (both organic and inorganic), a powerful web in which screens and nodes are conduits for emotions, memories, and pleasures. In this understanding of "connection," past and future feed one another in the same way that the plants nourish one another within the *milpa*, as well as nourish those who water and care for them.

Within the U.S. film industry, *Sleep Dealer* remains unique as a Spanish-language science fiction film written and directed by a Latino and set squarely within the political discourse of the U.S.-Mexico border. In its choices of addressing sociopolitical concerns and the purposeful casting of actors of color, it can perhaps be compared to the 2018 superhero/science fiction film *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler. Both films explicitly address the ongoing ramifications of colonialism, their casts are made up of mostly actors of color, and they explore the relationships between technology, diasporic communities, and state power. Yet in their depictions of the characters' relationships to technology, the two films diverge. Whereas *Black*

Panther presents Wakandans as completely one with their technology, a utopian blend of honor for ancient traditions, respect for ecological sovereignty, and highly advanced technological development, the human-technology relationship in *Sleep Dealer* is fraught and complex. In his discussion of the limitations of *Black Panther*'s politics, Niels Niessen points out that the Wakanda Design group, led by Princess Shuri (Leticia Wright) who devotes herself to creating integrated hardware and software solutions that protect the health and well-being of Wakandans, has many parallels with Apple, Inc., particularly considering the latter's "outspoken philosophy of technology as second nature" and its projected image of environmentally sound "symbiosis between technology and humanity" (145). Niessen notes that

...Wakanda resembles Apple's American Dream: a pure fiction in the non-speculative sense, in which, certainly in the *Black Panther* film, the exploitation of human labor and natural ecosystems that defines every extractive economy is left out of sight—much like the cobalt mines and Chinese assembly lines remain unseen in Apple's green utopia. (148)

By contrast, the focus of *Sleep Dealer* is precisely this unseen labor that upholds the American Dream, and in particular its visions of clean and effortless technology. The film centers on the violently extractive dimensions of techno-capitalist society, and at the same time underscores the importance of the natural world as an active participant in a relational network, rather than a resource. Whereas in Wakanda, the magical "heart-shaped herb" seems to exist only to be ingested by the Black Panther to increase his superpowers, *Sleep Dealer* suggests that the *milpa* plants need to be cared for in order to cultivate an ongoing relation to the historical past within the present, as it also situates an ancient Mesoamerican practice as key to a sustainable future. In

other words, *Sleep Dealer* illustrates an imagined potential reciprocal relationship between humans, technology, and nature that is non-hierarchical.

This posthuman and new materialist reading is less immediately present in the most recent U.S.-produced feature-length science fiction film by a Latinx director: Ángel Soto's 2023 *Blue Beetle*. Although *Blue Beetle*—a film adaptation of the superhero comic created by Charlton Comics and later taken over by DC Comics—ultimately still relies on the exceptional nature of an individual and does not extend beyond an anthropocentric worldview, it contributes significantly to the visibility of Latinx identity in the Hollywood superhero film genre and interweaves serious sociopolitical issues into its narrative in surprising ways. It approximates a cyborg sensibility in its portrayal of an immigrant Mexican-American family which pulls together, using technology to defeat a capitalist-colonialist corporation. This film is worth analyzing in some detail in comparison to *Sleep Dealer*, as it seems to both open a path forward for Latinx-centered storytelling in Hollywood speculative cinema within the emerging postcolonial superhero subgenre¹⁴, as well as demonstrate the limitations of big-budget Hollywood spectacles in creating *rasquache* cyborg visions.

Blue Beetle, produced by DC Studios and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures, was released with little fanfare in August of 2023 due to the Hollywood labor disputes which prevented the film's promotion, and is currently the lowest-grossing film within the DC media franchise. Directed by Puerto Rican Ángel Manuel Soto and written by Mexican Gareth Dunnet Alcocer, the film follows Jaime Reyes (Xolo Maridueña) as he returns to his fictional hometown of Palmera City (a fantastical and futuristic version of Miami) after graduating from Gotham college, where he discovers that his family has been suffering from health issues and eviction

¹⁴ See César Albarrán-Torres and Liam Burke for more on the Postcolonial Superheroes subgenre.

threats in his absence. Wanting to help his warm, tight-knit family—made up of his mother Rocio (Elpidia Carrillo), father Alberto (Damián Alcázar), grandmother (“Nana”, played by Adriana Barraza), sister Mili (Belissa Escobedo), and charismatic Uncle Rudy (George Lopez)—Jaime decides to get a job with Kord Industries after a chance meeting with the company founder’s daughter Jenny Kord (Brazilian actress Bruna Marquezine). Jenny, aiming to thwart her evil aunt and company CEO Victoria Kord (Susan Sarandon), steals an artifact called the Scarab, a sentient alien beetle-shaped object, and gives it to Jaime for safekeeping. When Jaime takes it home, the Scarab fuses with his body, turning Jaime into the powerful cyborg superhero Blue Beetle. This also makes him a target for Victoria Kord, who wants to harness the power of the Scarab in order to create a new machine called the “O.M.A.C.,” or One Man Army Corps (advertised as the “future of private policing”), which she also plans to sell to the U.S. military. A machine very reminiscent of the RoboCop from the eponymous 1987 Paul Verhoeven film, the O.M.A.C. “allows a single soldier to harness the power of legions” (13:10). After Victoria Kord kidnaps Jaime, Jenny helps the Reyes family organize a mission to save him, giving them access to her father’s older technology, and Uncle Rudy, Nana, and Mili all play pivotal roles in freeing Jaime so he can face the villain’s henchman—a cyborg named Ignacio Carapax, whose scarred face and hybrid body testify to Kord’s use of him as a test-subject for her techno-capitalist machinations. In the climactic moment, Jaime is stopped from killing Carapax by Khaji-Da, the sentient Scarab, when it shows him a flashback to Carapax’s childhood and the killing of his mother by the Guatemalan military (with the aid of the Reagan government) after which he was found by Kord and taken to be trained at the School of the Americas. Moved by Jaime’s empathy, Carapax turns on Kord and sets his O.M.A.C. suit to explode, destroying himself along with Kord as vengeance for his mother’s death.

In a similar gesture to the contrasting usage of the Del Rio corporation's violent technology by the main characters shown in *Sleep Dealer*, *Blue Beetle* presents viewers with two different modes of employing technology: to serve the divisive and oppressive aims of the police and the military, or to bring family members together and imperialists to justice. The same designer (Ted Kord) that founded Kord industries, leading to the eventual development of the O.M.A.C. as a tool for policing and counterinsurgency, also created earlier technology that the Reyes family later uses to help Blue Beetle. As a nod to the "rasquache" sensibility (as an "underdog" and "irreverent" perspective and attitude rather than a prescribed system or style, per Ybarra-Frausto) it is this older machinery (referred to by the film's characters as junky and variously reliable), alongside Uncle Rudy's own inventions, that becomes subversive in the hands of the Reyes family. It is Uncle Rudy's signal-jamming device that disrupts surveillance camera footage with episodes of *El Chapulín Colorado* (The Red Grasshopper), a popular 1970s Mexican superhero parody television program. Other key entertaining *rasquache* technologies include a bug-shaped plane (which needs a few kicks from Uncle Rudy to start its engine) that farts out a poisonous gas (Fig. 2), and a bubblegum shield. The violently oppressive, unfeeling, and non-symbiotic technology of the O.M.A.C. is shown to be "impoverished" (in Muñoz's sense) in juxtaposition with the culturally relevant and playful technology used by the Reyes family.



Figure 2: The bug ship from *Blue Beetle*, with the word "ánimo" (which roughly translates as "courage" or "positive energy") written by Mili in graffiti across the front.

Just as in *Sleep Dealer* the indiscriminate targeting of Mexican bodies as potential threats by military surveillance technology emerges as a potent sociopolitical critique, a similar critique is made in *Blue Beetle* when Victoria Kord instructs her soldiers to surround the Reyes family's home, saying "you know what to do—round them up" (1:06:42) as if she were leading a team of Border Patrol agents. In this moving scene, Jaime's father collapses from a heart attack after being hit by one of Kord's soldiers while trying to protect his daughter, and Jaime is dragged off to a helicopter, watching helplessly as his father dies. The emotional power of this scene stems largely from its resonance with the all-too-familiar Latinx experience of family separation. In an earlier scene, Uncle Rudy voices a concern about what Jaime's possession of the Scarab will do to the family, saying "what are they gonna do when they figure out that some Mexican kid has that kind of military tech inside of him? They're gonna lock him up" (35:44). He also points out that Kord and the government are in cahoots, and that any attention drawn to Jaime is going to mean unwanted government attention to his undocumented father and grandmother. These moments, similar to the other immigration dramas I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, serve to highlight constant sources of fear for many Latinx families in the U.S. and draw empathy from viewers.

Empathy and connection, again as in *Sleep Dealer*, are strongly centered, and it is interesting to note that Jaime is almost never without his family, nor is his superhero "suit" a mere technological appendage, but a sentient companion with whom he develops a "symbiotic" relationship (the Scarab Khaji-Da even begins to use Spanish phrases towards the end of the film). Thus, the collective is again prioritized over individual development as a source for empowerment and healing. This sense of collectivity extends beyond the family to incorporate a

broader pan-Latinx identity, given the incorporation of Carapax's lived history of U.S.-backed violence in Guatemala alongside the experience of the Mexican-American family. It is an acknowledgement of the differentially shared susceptibility to racist violence endured by Latinx and Chicax communities, a recognition of the "belonging-in-difference" identified by Muñoz, who underscores a "politics of collective relation" that paradoxically emerges in feeling separate or isolated from the majority population (Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o xv).

On the other hand, what is missing from *Blue Beetle* is the sense of vulnerability occasioned by the ongoing exposure to potentially harmful technologies, as well as the sense of humans as networked beings that are necessarily intertwined with non-human entities (both technological and organic). Although Jaime's body is taken over by the Scarab, this turns out to be a benevolent and beneficial symbiosis that attunes Jaime to his "greater purpose" as a chosen hero. Additionally, the "brown feeling" on display in *Blue Beetle* is packaged in easily locatable cultural touchpoints and tongue-in-cheek clichés, however enjoyable they may be for an audience "in the know." These are affects (fear, love, determination) that can be easily categorized and therefore have the potential to become subjected to what Muñoz terms "affective management," or "the framing of multicultural difference as manageable deviation" for the purposes of incorporating minoritarian subjects into a "larger social matrix" (48). Rather than locating feeling in interconnected bodies, Soto's film externalizes Latinx affects by locating them in heavily repeated phrases like "ánimo," in Mexican iconography such as the pictures of the Virgen de la Guadalupe in the Reyes home, or pop cultural elements such as music by Latinx artists. These elements together provide an atmosphere of Latinx subjectivity that, although they contribute significantly to the narrative, do not interweave with the formal elements of the film itself as they do in *Sleep Dealer*. In the latter, *rasquache* cyborg visuality is both the form and

the content. At the end, although Memo has achieved his goal of ecological vengeance, he remains vulnerable; he returns to his liminal border dwelling, now cognizant of the need for connection in the struggle for survival. At the end of *Blue Beetle*, the family returns to their community, Uncle Rudy is offered a job at Kord Industries (now run by Jenny Kord) to help them develop their new mission of “building a better future” (1:54:09), and Kord benevolently offers to help the Reyes family rebuild their home. Rudy’s *rasquache* inventions, it is implied, will now be put in service of the very corporation responsible for creating the O.M.A.C.

With its rosier picture of “Latinidad” and neatly resolved ending, *Blue Beetle* does not push its audience to inhabit the contradictory mode of cyborg embodiment. The affective power in *Sleep Dealer* lies primarily in the tensions it maintains between pleasure and pain, oppression and resistance, and its characters refuse to be parts that fit neatly into an imagined whole. Like Haraway’s, *Sleep Dealer*’s cyborg theory refuses to conform to an easy interpretation, and it does not rest on a fixed unitary origin—it is, rather, an ongoing project of transformation, open to being marked by influences and infinite impermanent encounters. Rivera’s cinematic cyborgs remain vulnerable, feeling themselves to be bodies enmeshed in a network of relations that is at times beneficial, and at other times not. These relational dynamics envisioned by the film proceed from a sense of history that is partially felt, in contradistinction to the terms established by a “neocolonial visuality” that seeks to excise feeling from perception.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of using speculative genres as a vehicle for multicultural expression and/or postcolonial critique within the commercial U.S. film industry is still new, unfolding in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter and subsequent #OscarsSoWhite movements (2013 and

2015, respectively). In this period of increased scrutiny on the industry's exclusion of artists of color, we have seen the rise of filmmakers like Jordan Peele, Ava Duvernay, Ryan Coogler, Taika Waititi, and others who demonstrate an investment in wielding speculative aesthetics as an anticolonial mode of storytelling. *Sleep Dealer*, as an independent film made outside the mainstream commercial industry, predates this trend and in some ways still outpaces it. The film's ability to continue to generate commentary and scholarship fifteen years after its release is a testament not only to the continued sociopolitical relevance of its dystopic visions but also to the tensions it maintains as a *rasquache* artwork suspended between complicity and resistance, prompting a continuous intellectual engagement with its complex themes and aesthetics. Additionally, as I have attempted to demonstrate, one of its most revelatory contributions to Latinx science fiction storytelling is its depiction of a networked relationality which relies on embodied knowledge as an essential element of perception. The "brown feeling" represented eludes capture as "manageable deviation" through its *rasquache* cyborg aesthetics that weave together contradictory elements. The film's three cyborg characters confront relations of difference without accepting hierarchical positioning of self against other, and they offer examples of Harawayan cyborgs who remain contradictory, liminal figures, both using the tools of dominant visibility and rejecting its containment. As the film continues to circulate, acquiring new relevance in each new viewing context, its audience continues to be made vulnerable to its affecting cyborg vision.

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III. Surviving Survival: *Juan de los muertos* and the Hunger of Cuban Speculative Cinema

Los muertos son la ausencia,
el olvido, lo inerte.
Una campana suena
y acarician con ojo profundo o desmedido,
balanceando su soledad entre las rosas.
Los muertos vienen de noche
o vienen por la tarde
a comer en las jícaras,
en los atriles,
en las gargantas ajenas...

- From "Los Muertos" by Nancy Morejón

Much of recent Cuban audiovisual production reflects a tension between an inert political landscape and a lively artistic striving. Twenty-first century feature films are inevitably haunted by both external perceptions of Cuba and internal expectations of the artist's role in society. Adapting Hollywood-style genres to local contexts has become a method for both attaining greater visibility for Cuban cinema as well as exploring structures of feeling for the individual in society, given Hollywood's emphasis on the arc of an individual's development within its classic narratives. Far from merely imitating Hollywood, however, Cuban filmmakers are working to expand and transform classic genres by both hybridizing them with other genres and utilizing them as a means to illuminate aspects of social reality, which in the last decade has seen drastic impoverishment on the island, with a ruling party reluctant to pursue economic change. Commercial genre films from Latin America have often been pitted against experimental art

cinema¹⁵, and like in the United States, horror and science fiction are often denigrated for their mass appeal and lack of political investment and/or aesthetic sensibilities. Yet as scholar Laura Podalsky argues, certain films, including popular and commercial films, invite us to feel differently, in ways that disrupt or interrupt dominant epistemologies. Following thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Podalsky invites Latin American film scholars to be attuned to “how films solicit particular emotional responses and/or stimulate more diffuse, affective reactions” (7). I want to build upon her work by considering how popular genres, which are often focused on hyper-affective spectacle, both respond to and solicit emotional responses from audiences. In Cuba, emergent “speculative” genres (horror, science fiction, and fantasy) are providing new avenues for engaging the sensorium within a cultural context in which the country is being drained of its lifeblood through mass emigration¹⁶. Those who stay are struggling to fulfill basic needs like acquiring food, medicine, and means of transportation. Yet, the film industry remains a vital part of the country’s culture, in large part due to the international collaboration it fosters. In what follows, I will analyze the film that inaugurated the use of speculative genres in Cuba, *Juan de los muertos* (2011), and argue that the visual excesses of the zombie genre serve to emphasize, paradoxically, both the literal and figurative sense of hunger and lack at the heart of the film, thus moving viewers to feel the deadening effects of survival under an increasingly authoritarian regime. Utilizing hunger as a cinematic mode, *Juan* opened a new path of emotion in the cinema for a Cuban audience. Many films that have come after it make use of speculative genre

¹⁵ As Rielle Navitski notes in relation to Argentine genre cinema, “This division between art and popular cinema can be mapped onto longstanding national debates over cultural colonization by Europe and the USA, and implicitly privileges a locally developed mode of experimental realism over productions that appropriate the conventions of US genre film.” (“The last heist revisited: reimagining Hollywood genre in contemporary Argentine crime film,” 360-1)

¹⁶ Data from 2022 shows that nearly 250,000 Cubans, more than 2 percent of the island’s 11 million population, have migrated to the United States across the southern border. (<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>)

conventions in order to represent lack and longing in ways previously unexplored, particularly in connection with the notion of survival.

In the last two decades of Cuban cinema there has been a marked interest in creating filmic worlds that prompt responses in the viewer of fear, displacement, disconnection and estrangement that directly contradict or refuse the state's official discourse, which since the revolution has emphasized camaraderie and the feeling of shared purpose in bringing about a socialist utopia. The cinema produced on the island in the years just after the 1959 revolution, while not always aligned with the government's ideological stances, often employed the frameworks of melodrama, historical epics, and documentary to serve didactic purposes, conveying particular messages about the type of society Cubans should be engaged in constructing¹⁷. The other genre commonly used has been the comedy, which films especially from the 1980s onward employ in critiques of the revolutionary government's bureaucracy and increasingly hypocritical stances. In the 21st century, Cuban filmmakers have demonstrated an interest in employing the notion of dystopia to capture the sense of failure and disillusionment in the previous era's revolutionary fervor, often utilizing images of ruins or barren landscapes. As Santiago Juan-Navarro argues,

In a cinemascapes that for decades has been produced under the Socialist tutelage and in the context of its propaganda, moving the spotlight to imaginary worlds, barren landscapes, individual emotions, or literary universes can signal a radical break to contest the hegemonic culture in Cuba. In fact, the unprecedented interest in ethical concerns,

¹⁷ Although as Michael Chanan observes in his analysis of Julio Garcia Espinoza's speech at a gathering of filmmakers in Montreal in 1974, since the Revolutionary government's inception, Cuban filmmakers were concerned with balancing an explicitly didactic cinema with an ideologically rich fictional cinema. (333-4)

structures of feelings, as well as in the relationship between humans and the environment can be interpreted as the beginning of a new stage in the history of Cuban cinema. (3)

The previous sense of order and communalism has long since broken down, and the new cinema requires new methods with which to express this loss. Horror and science fiction are genres that provide audiovisual artists with a particular set of tools for both imagining possible futures and questioning established perceptions of the present. Instead of the pity or sadness often associated with melodrama, those classic Aristotelian feelings that can purify the viewer through catharsis, horror moves its audience to revel in those most impure of feelings: fear, revulsion, and deep thrills. Science fiction emphasizes a less immediate form of fear through a sense of strangeness or the uncanny; the possibility for the world we know to deviate from its path as a result of some invention or biological aberration¹⁸. The zombie movie, as a “creature” film in which human bodies are transformed into flesh-eating cannibals as a result of a virus or scientific experiment gone wrong, straddles the border between horror and science fiction. As such, it provides the immediacy of horror coupled with broader social speculative reflections¹⁹, focusing on the undead body as the primary site through which to think/feel the process of survival under present political conditions.

These genre conventions, joined with film’s material capacity to touch and stimulate viewers as embodied subjects, point to cinema’s ability to unmoor film audiences and float us

¹⁸ Darko Suvin has crafted a now-canonical definition of science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment”. He places emphasis on a “novum” as something introduced into the fictional world which differentiates it from reality. (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

¹⁹ The zombie genre in cinema is a sub-genre of both horror and science fiction, since it contains the elements of bodily dismemberment, blood, and gore characteristic of horror, but also, as Emily Maguire and others have pointed out, since George Romero singlehandedly redefined the cinematic zombie, it is a product not of magical enslavement but biological contagion, “the product of an illness such as a virus or an extreme dose of radiation” (*Simultaneous Worlds* 175), which brings it into the realm of science fiction.

into new territories of sense-ability. Theories of embodied spectatorship proposed by scholars such as Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack, informed by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, rather than assert a separation between affective approximations to artworks and pure, disembodied cognition, instead suggest that perception necessarily includes both the senses and the intellect. This is an approach that recognizes the embodied nature of visibility, and at the same time the illusion of the unity of the self—instead of a bounded subject encountering a film-object, the experience of film spectatorship is one in which the spectator-body and the film-body engage in “a mutual permeability and mutual creation of self and other” (Marks 149). Furthermore, as bodies and their sensoria are molded and conditioned by culture and society, the spectator-film encounter occurs as part of an ongoing social process in which emergent collective sensibilities develop interrelatedly with solidified ideologies and institutions—what cultural theorist Raymond Williams termed “structures of feeling” (132). This framework permits an understanding of how the currents of thought/feeling expressed in recent speculative Cuban cinema and solicited from its audience, through visual and aural techniques as well as symbols and themes, focus on hunger as a physical and emotional state that is not limited to an individual’s experience but extends outward to the national and international political sphere.

Zombie Politics in Cuba

Juan de los muertos, the zombie comedy directed by Alejandro Brugués and released in 2011, marks a turning point in Cuban cinema. *Juan* demonstrated to the state-controlled film institute (the ICAIC: Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos) what a successful, collaboratively produced, popular genre film could be. Working with many ICAIC professionals, as well as independent film producers on the island as well as the Spanish production company

La Zanfoña Producciones, Brugués and the film's producer Inti Herrera created Cuba's first live action science fiction/horror feature film, as well as its most expensive film ever produced, with a budget of around 3 million U.S. dollars. When it played at the Havana Film Festival in December 2011, Cubans flocked to see it in such numbers that the police had to intervene and extra screenings were added²⁰. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the film received the festival's audience award. Although many recent independent Cuban films (often dubbed *cine joven* or young cinema) have ventured into different B-movie genres such as the road movie, the thriller, and the gangster film, as noted by Anne Marie Stock (58), I argue that *Juan's* usage of the zombie genre, and other films' recent ventures into speculative genres, are not incidental but in fact strategic in their ability to connect viewers to global currents while at the same time emphasizing the experience of estrangement that results from the everyday struggle for survival. The rebellious and politically generative possibilities of recent Cuban films that draw upon horror conventions lie partially in their affective encounter with audiences, both local and global. While blood and gore abound in *Juan*, the revulsion this prompts is coupled with the pervasive sense of lack embodied in the figure of the protagonist Juan and his clear link to the zombie as a symbol of the deadening effects of the constant need to survive and *resolver* (the Cuban term for "making do", often a combination of legal and illegal ventures to acquire basic necessities like food and clothes) particularly amidst increasing anxiety over migration.

The film opens with a sequence that immediately establishes the central themes and political stakes that will be taken up in the rest of the film: Juan, the protagonist, is positioned as already a survivor, and specifically a survivor of certain events that have significantly impacted the island of Cuba and its inhabitants. This sets a tone for the film that is markedly different from

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/americas/zombies-in-juan-of-the-dead-chomp-on-cubas-sacred-cows.html>

other zombie-comedies, whose characters are transformed into survivors by the apocalyptic events that unfold in the narrative. There is an overhead shot of Juan, the protagonist, as he floats on a homemade raft just off the boardwalk of downtown Havana. As the camera slowly zooms in, lowering on Juan's sleeping form, the only sound we hear is the gentle rocking of the waves. The camera then cuts to a second shot from underneath the raft, from an as-yet-unknown and vaguely threatening aquatic point of view. These two successive shots instantly evoke the countless number of Cubans who have fled, or attempted to flee, the island, many on homemade rafts, and many of whom drowned in the process (see Fig. 3). This connotation is confirmed just a few seconds later, when Juan's friend Lázaro emerges from the water with a snorkel and harpoon gun and queries "Don't you just want to paddle to Miami sometimes" (01:57)? Juan, having broken out a bottle of rum, responds in the negative, saying that in Miami he'd have to work, whereas in Havana he can just be a hunter-gatherer like the Taíno people (the island's original inhabitants). He then speaks a phrase he'll repeat later in key moments of the film: "Besides...I'm a survivor. I survived [the Mariel boatlift], I survived Angola, I survived the Special Period and this thing that came afterwards" (02:14). Thinking he is about to reel in a fish, Juan then pulls on his line and drags a corpse towards them, which reanimates suddenly and frighteningly, prompting Lázaro to shoot it in the head with his harpoon gun. The two friends agree to keep this episode between them as they paddle frantically towards the shore.

In addition to framing Cubans as already survivors through Juan's characterization, this scene also makes reference to the ongoing issue of migration, a thread that runs throughout the film's narrative. The "Special Period in Times of Peace," often shortened to the Special Period, was the name given by the Cuban government to the period of economic crisis in Cuba that was precipitated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which was Cuba's central trading partner and

provider of subsidies. This period lasted from roughly 1991 to the early 2000s, when oil-rich Venezuela stepped in as a trading partner. But the impacts of this crisis were still being felt during the production of *Juan de los Muertos*, and are still rippling even today, given that the island has never fully recovered and came to depend heavily on tourism (an industry the film satirizes). An important consequence of the Special Period was the wave of migration it exacerbated, which included the Rafter's Crisis. The 1980 Mariel exodus mentioned by Juan in the film was another enormously impactful moment, when 124,769 Cubans left within a three-month-period (Cervantes Rodríguez and Portes 168). Thus “survival” within this Cuban context means in part enduring the loss of friends and family who, over time and for varying reasons, have had to leave their loved ones behind. At the same time, the film questions the value of this kind of survival—is it worth surviving so many traumatic events just to float through life as Juan does, drinking rum, emotionally numb and lacking deep social and familial ties? Vulnerability and agency (Juan's choice to remain given his precarious circumstances) are thus presented in tandem within the first scene, raising questions about what constitutes a livable life in present-day Cuba.

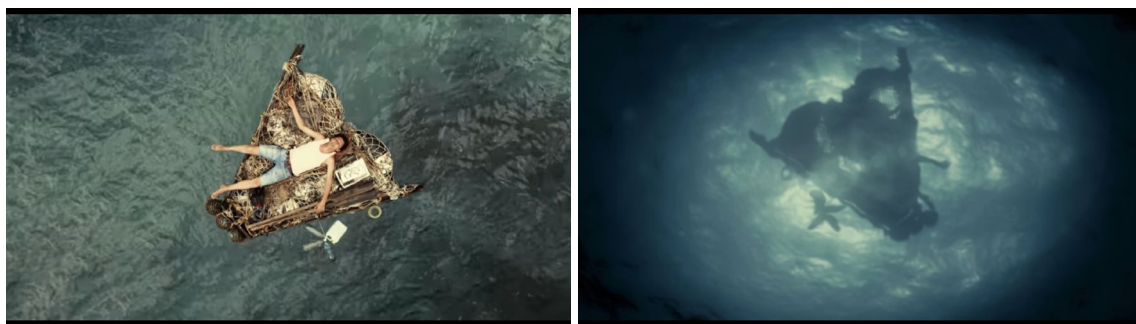


Fig. 3: Juan floats on a raft with a bottle of rum.

Although it is a satire, the film's potent critique of the state's inability to adequately provide for its citizens is amplified by the zombie genre's powerful affective charges of fear and disorientation stemming from images of bodies deprived of subjectivity, memory, and free will.

The zombie, as a dead body that is reawakened under special circumstances and not allowed to rest peacefully, also serves to question the “end” of the Special Period, which for many never truly ended: “This thing that came afterwards” is not categorizable as a period of recovery, but is an ongoing, inescapable struggle. The opening credits sequence presents us with shots of daily life in which residents of Havana go about their daily lives already looking suspiciously similar to zombies, dragging their feet and staring straight ahead with unfocused gazes. In a few instances the film’s characters comment that in fact, things don’t seem that different from before the outbreak—staring down at the streets from the roof, Lázaro observes “there are no cars, the stores are closed...just like the Special Period” (26:42). However, compared to other zombie-comedy films produced in the U.S. or Great Britain, wherein ‘survivors’ of the apocalypse complete acts of heroism under extreme, extraordinary circumstances (often creating unlikely heroes out of ordinary people), *Juan de los Muertos* demonstrates that the daily reality faced by ordinary Cubans requires a kind of survivalism that for anyone else would be unprecedented. *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004), like many other modern interpretations of the zombie (including *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978), which is set in a mall) can be read as an allegorical critique of the mindless consumption and lazy conformity of capitalist societies, which turns thinking and feeling human beings into soulless automatons. What sets *Juan* apart from these films is that mindlessness emerges not from overconsumption but from an overexposure to “apocalyptic” conditions—the implication being that the constant “survival mode” required by life in present-day Cuba has made its inhabitants both well prepared for the end of the world, but also unable to fully feel or conceptualize it²¹ due to the dehumanizing and

²¹ As Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodriguez observes, “that Cubans have undergone a ‘special period’, ominously similar to what cinema and literature have described as apocalyptic or postapocalyptic scenarios – that is, lack of essential services, of gas, and even of food – has prepared them to resist and find solutions, but at the same time has made them less perceptive when faced with a situation of total chaos. The social commentary that this situation implies –

numbing effects of suffering through a lack of everyday needs such as food, medicine, reliable transportation, and crucially, the lack of ability to maintain strong familial bonds.

The institutional critiques inherent to the genre form the basis for much of the satire throughout the rest of the film, laying bare the real conditions of unlivability under a system of governance unwilling to be held accountable to the real concerns of its populace. Juan and Lázaro come to find out that strange things are afoot through official TV news reports, which frame the undead menace causing riots across the city as caused by “dissidents” or “antisocials” on the U.S. government’s payroll—an explanation the two protagonists do not believe, given the regularity with which the government blames any unrest in the country on the U.S., but neither do they spend any time considering how or why the situation might have developed, as they become consumed with finding a way to first profit from it, then survive it. The film presents a strong critique of the ineptitude of the government, a common trope of the genre. Here it takes on an especially strong valence, however, as not only is the Cuban state-sponsored media shown to be either willfully misinforming the public or completely stumped by the situation, but the film leaves almost no state entity un-prodded—it pokes fun at the Committees for Revolutionary Defense (CDRs), the police, the healthcare system, transportation, and it shows constant references to the revolution on T-shirts, billboards, and graffiti. The cupola of the iconic capitol building is shown going up in flames after being hit by an out-of-control airplane, and the famous Plaza de la Revolución, site of many political speeches and of revolutionary fervor, becomes the site of a zombie massacre. In the same way that George Romero took the afro-Haitian *zombi* myth and adapted it to his own context in order to address social and political

the difficulty of responding when faced with the exceptional because it is ‘recognized’ as familiar by its constant presence – becomes sharper when considered in relation to North American or European referents, where it is assumed that chaos will appear novel” (My translation 88).

concerns specific to the U.S. in the late 1960s-70s, Brugués mobilizes a genre made widely popular in the U.S. to unmask Cuban issues with tongue-in-cheek. At the same time, there is a darker, more cynical message about both the real and metaphorical hunger suffered under an oppressive regime. If the cannibal became in the 20th century the ultimate metaphor for subaltern rebellion and revolution for scholars such as Roberto Fernández Retamar, who found in Shakespeare’s Caliban the signifier of a unified autochthonous identity that gleefully consumes colonial elements and hybridizes them with indigenous and African elements in a gesture both destructive and creative²², this film emphasizes the lack at the heart of the cannibal’s consumption; the hunger that is never sated. The rebellious Caliban has become the tired and cynical drifter, thin from a diet supplemented only by repetitive party slogans. In her analysis of Pedro Juan Gutierrez’s *Trilogía Sucia de la Habana* (1998), a semi-autobiographical prose narrative that chronicles the first years of the Special Period, Guillermina de Ferrari observes the way in which hunger in the text “produces filth and indignity” as the extreme undernourishment in the country causes the characters to do things they would never otherwise have done, including embracing cannibalism (198). Acts of cannibalism represent a fictionalized idea of the real, documented starvation suffered by Cubans during this period. Similarly, the zombie cannibalism presented in *Juan de los Muertos* functions to underscore the vulnerability of Cuban bodies to starvation and indignity, at the same time that it reasserts (ironically) the ability of Cubans to be “survivors” in its depiction of the zombie-killers.

The zombie’s metaphorical and affective hunger is nevertheless not entirely pessimistic, as the film seems to suggest that the antidote to ‘surviving survival’ is not turning one’s back on a failing system, but rather seeking connection through alternative modes—through mutual care

²² See Fernández Retamar, Roberto., and Fredric Jameson. *Todo Caliban*. 1. ed. [de CLACSO], CLACSO, 2004.

and support, through the persistence of creativity and humor, and through striving for necessary dialogue with global communities. As the number of zombies multiplies, the pair of friends recognize an opportunity for profit, and they decide to start their own zombie-killing business, using a combination of Juan's military expertise (he fought in the Angolan war) and an assorted number of homemade weapons, including the harpoon gun, a chain, a hammer, a crucifix, and an oar. The oar is Juan's weapon of choice, and it serves as a constant visual reminder of the possibility of migration—by using it to combat a threat, first for profit, then for self-preservation, and finally for the defense of the whole island, it becomes a loaded symbol for Cubans who choose to stay. Added to the zombie-killing crew are Juan's estranged daughter Camila who is visiting from Spain, Lázaro's son Vladi, and two neighbors, La China and El Primo. For a while, their scheme works, until the zombies become too numerous, and eventually the crew loses La China and El Primo and is forced to hide in a parking garage. Lázaro comes up with a plan to construct flotation devices out of empty oil drums and attach them to a car, which they can drive to the shore and then make their escape by sea to Miami, coming around full circle to where the film began. Just when it seems they are all about to escape, Juan decides to stay behind, and in the film's climactic moment, says farewell to his only remaining family and friends, repeating again his mantra: "I'm a survivor..." and adding "Maybe I'll survive this too. And maybe people will see me and they'll join to help. I'm fine here, I like it here" (1:29:00-1:29:16). In the final shot, Juan turns away from the ocean to face the city and an incoming horde of zombies, jumps off a pile of bodies with his oar in hand, and is caught in mid-air in a freeze-frame. His identity as "survivor" within the particular national conditions established by the film will not enable him to leave; in order to maintain that identity, he must remain and fight despite losing his family. However, what might be read as a form of simple patriotism is complicated by Juan's comment

that maybe others will see him and join in the effort. Since the film has implied that there are no non-zombies left on the island, the comment seems to be directed outward, and might perhaps be read as an appeal to the film audience—to Cubans in the diaspora as well as Cubans on the island, and to non-Cubans—to refuse apathy and help him fight for a better country. Juan rejects the opportunity to escape and leave the island to its fate, but in circumstances that seem impossible to surmount, if he remains alone.

At the end of most zombie films, the zombie threat is usually eradicated, either through integrating the zombies into society (as in *Shaun of the Dead*), completing the redemptive arc of the main characters in such a way that the zombies fade into the background due to the centrality of the newly solidified familial/friendship/romantic bonds (as in *Zombieland* and *Dawn of the Dead*), or eliminating the zombies via the reestablishment of institutional order (*Night of the Living Dead*, *28 Days Later*). *Juan* thus subverts this convention with its highly ambiguous ending and does so in a way that both resonates with Cuban history and its present, and that thumbs its nose at official policies emphasizing national unity against North American oppressors. Although the film begins with images of extreme individualism as the result of dire necessity, the characters in *Juan* move through a first stage of individualist profit-seeking (the zombie-killing business), to an emphasis on the importance of family, friendship, and mutual care outside of the state-sanctioned modes of community. Juan's daughter Camila, Vladi, and Lázaro end the film floating to an uncertain future, in the ocean where the film began, untethered to the nation-state and left only with one another. Juan, meanwhile, stays in order to not merely “survive” in what is now an obviously un-survivable circumstance, but fight for a life that now contains meaningful connections. His wild determination poses a daunting challenge to the viewer—can Cubans fight their own tolerance of barely livable conditions and struggle for

change against intransigent institutional forces? Can things be done “My Way,” as suggested by the parodical Sex Pistols cover of the Frank Sinatra song that plays over the final sequence of the film?

The Strange Feels Familiar: Genre Aesthetics, Emotion, and Politics

Why is it important to examine emotion in Cuban cinema now, and what does genre have to do with it? The Cuban film industry, which has a rich tradition of auteur and politically committed filmmaking, and which plays a large role in cultivating and promoting the work of filmmakers throughout the Latin American region, has had a limited investment in science fiction and horror films until quite recently. Cuban filmmakers are no strangers to employing the sensory possibilities of the medium, moving their audiences to extremes of emotion most commonly through the use of melodrama²³. Yet horror and science fiction genres in cinema provide different avenues for feeling that are arguably radical, especially considering the history of the medium’s role in shaping and defining the socialist nation. Importantly, the zombie subgenre often prompts feelings of dread and uncertainty that do not necessarily resolve themselves—even when the zombies are thwarted, there is often an underlying sense that they might return, given ongoing anxieties over viral infections and epidemics/pandemics. Sian Ngai, in her masterful book *Ugly Feelings* (2005), centers her analysis on feelings that are not usually examined in relation to our aesthetic encounters with artworks, such as envy, irritation, and paranoia. These “ugly” feelings, she argues,

²³ Despite the handwringing of Cuban critics like Enrique Colina and Daniel Diaz Torres in the early 1970s over the popularity of sentimental melodramas which were seen to be imitations of Hollywood and therefore a mechanism of cultural colonization, as noted by Ana López (“The Melodrama in Latin America: Films, Telenovelas and the Currency of a Popular Form,” p. 7), melodramatic narratives have continued to thrive in Cuban cinema, most notably in films by Humberto Solás and Pastor Vega in the 70s and 80s, and more recently in films made by Ernesto Daranas Serrano and Carlos Lechuga.

are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release...Moods like irritation and anxiety, for instance, are defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the ‘suddenness’ on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends. And unlike rage, which cannot be sustained indefinitely, less dramatic feelings like envy and paranoia have a remarkable capacity for duration. (7)

Although “hunger” cannot immediately be categorized as a feeling or mood, given that it is a metaphor that turns a real physiological condition into a sense of longing or lack, the quality of “ongoingness” suggested by the zombie in a Cuban context is key to my reading of this film and its contribution to the genre. If there is anything cathartic about *Juan*, it is the political satire that encourages a humorous reaction to the depiction of Cuban institutions. However, as opposed to the temporality of fear as discussed by Hitchcock, which requires a sense of suddenness brought on by suspense, this film’s utilization of techniques which for other horror films might provide something like catharsis are undermined by the sense of duration the film provides—the sense that Cubans are already zombies, are already living through disaster before the disaster, practicing survival daily. For Ngai, the “ongoingness,” of these noncathartic feelings emerges from “the politically charged predicament of suspended agency,” in which inactive bodies can become subject to manipulation by external forces (12). Thus, part of what *Juan* does so effectively is to demonstrate the necessity of facing one’s own passivity and fighting back against unlivable conditions, by emphasizing the ways in which survival can become so quotidian as to be almost negligible.

While *Juan de los Muertos* effectively mobilizes the zombie genre to formulate an internal critique, it is also highly attuned to the way in which the image of the Cuban zombie

might impact an international audience differently, given existing stereotypes about Cuban's lack of entrepreneurial agency and access to global market resources. In today's Cuban cinema landscape, transnational collaborations in film production have markedly increased (especially since 2014, when the U.S. relationship with Cuba began to thaw), and this has had an undeniable impact on films' subject matter, setting, and aesthetics. As Paul Schroeder Rodriguez remarks,

...while today cultural nationalism is still evident in many specific films, the tendency over the past two decades has been for filmmakers to create transnational products through casting, setting, narrative, and aesthetic choices that facilitate the films' marketing to international audiences and help satisfy the differing economic and political interests of the co-producing parties. (89)

This creates a bind in which there is a simultaneous demand for the commodification of a film's national culture, and a need to make the film legible on a global scale. The zombie film is a transnational product *par excellence* of the neoliberal era, given its built-in themes of alienation and social death, as well as the zombie's status as, in Sarah Juliet Lauro's terms, "an icon of disempowerment" (9), with recent examples emerging from not only the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe, but also South Korea, the Philippines, Nigeria, Malaysia, and other countries. It is both highly adaptable to local cultural contexts in forming critiques of multiple systems of oppression, and broadly identifiable as a long-existing genre that adheres to an established set of recognizable conventions. The zombie film that circulates from the Global South often becomes thus a metaphor for the overconsumption of bodies (either through extractive labor or ideological control), the images of which are then consumed by global audiences who are all, it would seem, insatiable for images of violent bodily dismemberment, mindless rage, and the often-strange alliances formed under extreme and unprecedented

circumstances. Yet rather than embracing hegemonic influences unquestioningly and creating commodities to satisfy market demands, there is often a complex negotiation of both national and global criteria in Latin American filmmaking, as Sophia A. McClennen has noted (*Globalization* 8). In the case of *Juan*, zombie themes and aesthetics are put in the service of reshaping and critiquing national identity with full awareness of the notion of “Cubanness” the film releases into global circulation. While humorously demonstrating Cuban ingenuity and resourcefulness through the portrayal of Juan’s cold-blooded zombie-killing business (a corrective to impressions of Cubans forbidden access to capitalism), the film simultaneously shows a longing for connection to global currents, which include an increasing interest in genre films, and a sense of disempowerment and estrangement felt across the world under conditions of worsening inequality.

The fact that the movie zombie has over the last several decades grown more flexible in its interpretations (as a stand-in for vaguely racialized others, as symbol of the return of the repressed/oppressed, as representative of the crumbling decay of late capitalist society) does not seem to have diminished its peculiar potency. More complete genealogies of the cinematic zombie exist elsewhere, but my particular interest lies in examining the affects produced in the encounter between the ravaged undead bodies on screen and a Cuban audience in the aftermath of the Special Period and ongoing migration. Making the most of its budget, *Juan de los Muertos* strives to reproduce Hollywood-level special effects, creating enough gore and violence to satisfy the requirements of a modern zombie movie with global appeal. For a Cuban audience, unaccustomed to seeing special effects and the over-the-top genre spectacle typical of Hollywood within their own national cinema, *Juan*’s use of zombie genre conventions is unique enough to provide novelty, but its true appeal for Cuban audiences lies in its ability to maneuver

the genre to craft an effective and original commentary on Cuban life. Although many younger Cubans are familiar with the recent flush of zombie genre movies and television produced in the U.S. and U.K. (such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), *Zombieland* (2009), *Warm Bodies* (2013), or *The Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-2019), to name just a few) some of which might be shown on state-controlled television, others accessed through digital piracy networks, many are completely unfamiliar with the cinematic zombie. This can be illustrated in a comment by the film's producer, Inti Herrera, that the film's creators had to hold "zombie camps" ("campamentos de zombi") in order to train the cast members to act like zombies—i.e., slow-moving, inarticulate, single-minded flesh devourers (personal interview 2022). Thus, whereas a typical zombie film fan in the U.S. might approach the film with a certain knowledge of genre conventions and expectations for how the film might make them feel, the particular sensorial impact of this film on the Cuban viewer should be closely examined even as the film has achieved global popularity and wide circulation by the standards of this nationally produced cinema.

Juan de los Muertos mobilizes the zombie myth as a metaphor for estrangement and separation, and at the same time engages the senses to incite another kind of meaning-making that relies upon the viewer's embodied knowledge of hunger and survival. When watching a film, our cognitive and evaluative skills work together with our senses to give meaning to the fictional film world. As Vivian Sobchack suggests,

we need to alter the binary and bifurcated structures of the film experience suggested by previous formulations and, instead, posit the film viewer's lived body as a carnal "third term" that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective

image—both differentiating and unifying them in reversible (or chiasmatic) processes of perception and expression. (51)

The body that enters the movie theater brings with it a unique sensorium that combines biological sensory mechanisms with cognitive processes informed by language and experiences and molded by social and environmental factors. In the case of *Juan*, the “cinesthetic subject” whose lived experience is informed by Cuban cinema, its history, and its present perceives this zombie film in a unique way. What is highlighted in the film’s intertwining of social critique and zombie aesthetics at the site of the encounter with a Cuban viewer/subject is the experience of lack—understood as hunger, desire, and/or estrangement. The film’s narrative and aesthetics reveal a longing for the “aliveness” that comes from the integration of family, friendship, and social/national identity, as opposed to the isolation and stagnation that can result from the everyday work of mere survival in present-day Cuba. The film’s visual and aural excesses underscore a stark and poignant reality: the zombie’s disconnection between soul and body represents the disconnection felt by Cubans between their sense of allegiance to familial and social ties, and their national identity as caretakers of an increasingly unstable revolution.

The excessive elements characteristic of camp, parody, and horror texts, here form a counterpoint to the lack at the center of the film. The gaps between the screened subjects and their desires become increasingly felt over the course of the narrative: Juan’s longing for connection with his daughter, Vladi’s desire for a sense of purpose not achieved through illegal pursuits, and Lázaro’s never consummated sexual desires. At the same time, the central characters are surrounded by zombie cannibals and forced to commit extreme acts of violence. Horror cinema intensifies sensorial reactions through sound and visual images that focus on what Linda Williams describes as the “spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation...”

(4), and *Juan* employs many images of blood, gore, and bodily dismemberment and desecration typical of the genre. Yet, these intensities are mediated by humor and underscored by a strong political message, thus calling upon the spectator's knowledge and experience to construct the film's meaning. The excess of the body horror is juxtaposed with the portrayal of a "zombified" populace, and this juxtaposition serves to emphasize what is lacking in the society it critiques, the emptiness of unmet needs and desires.

The choice to cast the unsmiling and deadpan Alexis Díaz de Villegas, renowned Cuban actor and theater director, in the central role of Juan reinforces the film's theme of the deadening effects of life within an economically disadvantaged and ideologically impoverished society—he is an actor known for his flat affect, haunted-looking face, and sarcastic delivery. His body in the film is gaunt and lanky; he slinks around shirtless or in a tank top, rum bottle always close at hand, and seems to take events that unfold around him in stride, dispassionately. Just a few minutes into the film, in a reference to Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film *Memories of Underdevelopment* (perhaps the Cuban film most recognizable to an international audience), Juan stands on his rooftop and observes the world below through a telescope, and like Sergio, the protagonist of that film, seems disconnected from what surrounds him. In contrast to his best friend and sidekick Lázaro, whom the film establishes as sexist, sex-obsessed, and ignorant, Juan's desires are more muted and he seems to just float, disinterested, through his life. At the core of this disinterest seems to be his disconnection from his family, and in particular from his daughter Camila, whose mother took her to Spain at a young age, illustrating a type of family separation that has become very common for Cubans. This sense of separation and apathy, coupled with Juan's appearance and body language, suggest from the beginning of the film a zombie-like quality: Juan's existence is something between life and death, it is mere survival.

The hunger that haunts him, and the film overall, is a hunger for connection, for a sense of belonging and fulfillment.

The actor's association with hunger follows him from an earlier project: in a short black-and-white silent film released seven years earlier titled *Cuca and the Chicken*, Diaz de Villega plays a man who lives alone in an apartment and has no food in his refrigerator. Upon seeing a flyer announcing a cycling competition for which the first prize is a chicken, he promptly retrieves his bicycle and heads to the race, but upon winning he is handed one measly chicken thigh in a plastic bag. When he brings it home, he discovers that his refrigerator is broken, and asks his neighbor Cuca to put the chicken in her refrigerator while he attempts to fix his. Cuca immediately begins to cook the chicken for herself but in the process gets locked out of her apartment. The chicken burns, becomes inedible, and the short ends with a shot sequence of all the characters exercising to get in shape for the next year's bicycle race. There are several close-ups of Diaz de Villega's face at key moments in the short – in the opening scene, he sits at a table facing slightly off camera while he slowly and repeatedly mixes a comical amount of sugar into water and drinks it (drinking sugar water was a real solution for staving off hunger for many Cubans during the height of the Special Period). The camera sits at table-level and unflinchingly focuses on his face, which is gaunt, with exaggerated hollows around his eyes, hair greased and combed in a style reminiscent of Buster Keaton. He maintains a complete unblinking deadpan as he stirs and drinks, stirs and drinks, to the soundtrack of a lone harmonica tune. The overall impression conveyed is one of a constant state of hunger that breeds isolation and egotism (the protagonist is alone except for those who live around him, and his neighbors only seem to want what he has). Cuca becomes the titular character because of her betrayal of the protagonist, who remains nameless, and her declaration that she will safeguard the chicken because her neighbor

is a “militant” and because she knows that the chicken has not been “ill-gotten” becomes a political joke as the regime’s emphasis on adherence to ideology is quickly abandoned for the lure of protein. Thus, in a manner similar to *Juan, Cuca and the Chicken* presents us with images of extreme individualism as a result of dire necessity.

It is difficult to speak about hunger in Latin American cinema without recalling Glauber Rocha’s radical filmmaking in the 1960s and 70s, his notion of an “estética da fome” (aesthetic of hunger) within Brazilian *cinema novo* and the larger project of what came to be understood as the New Latin American Cinema. The filmmakers of this era, which included the Brazilian Rocha, the Bolivian Grupo Ukamau, Cuban Julio Garcia Espinoza, and Argentinians Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, among others, while employing diverse approaches had the shared goal to create a form of cinema that was autochthonous, anti-Hollywood, anti-European, and oriented towards awakening viewers to their social reality. Vitaly, these new cinemas were to be crafted with a new aesthetic that was non-commercial and that aggressively confronted the region’s neocolonial politics. In 1965, Glauber Rocha presented his political film manifesto “Eztétyka da fome” in Italy. In it, he argues that “Economic and political conditioning has led us to philosophical weakness and impotence.... It is for this reason that the hunger of Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom: it is the essence of our society... Our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood” (369). Yet this hunger was not simply a lack, but a source of political power, because “the most noble cultural manifestation of hunger is violence. Cinema Novo shows that the normal behavior of the starving is violence; and the violence of the starving is not primitive” (369). Rocha aimed to depict a “gallery of the hungry” with the purpose of exposing the nation’s underdevelopment and thus the necessity of revolution. The violence of the imagery, jarring for an audience accustomed

to consuming escapist Hollywood fare, would provoke a new kind of hunger in the spectator: a hunger for change. However, the theory espoused by these politically committed filmmakers often fell short in practice, and as McLennan observes,

the ideals of the New Latin American Cinema were often out of synch with its realities: directors spoke of a cinema for the people while making films that were only appreciated by an intellectual elite, and they sought an independent, radical cinema while necessarily relying on funding sources from outside of Latin America (usually from Europe) and/or from the state. (98)

Additionally, as McLennan argues, while condemning Hollywood's cinema of "spectacle", Rocha's films, as well as many others of the NLAC, were themselves highly stylized, creating an exaggerated spectacle of violence (98). This leads her to raise a productive question regarding the supposed antagonism between entertaining and commercially viable cinema and politically committed cinema—namely, if an aesthetic of hunger is in part a "utopic longing" which "calls for a certain degree of cinematic pleasure" then might not "some measure of cinematic spectacle...be necessary for political filmmaking" (96)? I follow McLennan, Laura Podalsky, Rielle Navitski, and others in dismissing the notion that a film with commercial viability cannot be political. While not necessarily a global blockbuster on the scale of *City of God* or *Babel*, *Juan de los muertos*, as I have attempted to show, is a highly political film that received an unprecedented level of international recognition in part through its strategic engagement of popular genre conventions and a healthy dose of spectacle.

This tension between spectacle and lack, and the ensuing political critique, was not lost on the Cuban audience at the time of the film's release—the response was overwhelmingly positive, given that the film received the audience award at the Havana film festival, but there

were also negative responses from both the public and critics that questioned the film's vulgar caricature of Cubans as sex-hungry, individualistic alcoholics, and the export of this representation of Cuban identity to the rest of the world. One commenter on the website cubadebate.cu with the username "RK" laments the film's foreign financial investment as the cause of its inability to portray "real" Cuban daily life, and referred to the film as "...chavacanería, arte que en su intento de vender y complacer se prostituye" (...vulgarity, art that in its intent to sell and please prostitutes itself) (my translation). Leonardo Padura, one of Cuba's most widely read novelists, gave the film a mostly favorable review at the time of its release and wrote the following:

...Because *Juan de los Muertos* is not simply a parody of "zombie movies." More than anything it is a work about survival. And more specifically about Cuban survival and the mechanisms created by islanders to make a living by any possible means and, if necessary, at the margins of institutions and official mechanisms. It is an example of a certain culture of resistance to which many have resorted in order to overcome difficult moments through unorthodox means. (my translation)

Here Padura points to the way in which the idea of the Cuban zombie speaks over and above this particular example of the film genre. In what Sarah Juliet Lauro terms "zombie dialectics" (4), the zombie exemplifies the separation between body and consciousness, life and death, oppression and resistance—never at peace between these irreconcilable tensions, the zombie becomes a walking threatening hunger, a physical manifestation of torment. In the context of Cuba at the time of the film's production, on an island buffeted by economic and political processes leading to a steady stream of migration, the zombie represents a body divided from itself. The notion of survival becomes not a celebration of victory over obstacles, but an

evocation of the numbing quotidian struggle to acquire basic necessities and maintain one's sanity in the face of the continuous loss of friends and family to migration.

While the political critique of *Juan* seems clear—that the state institutions are crumbling and useless, providing no real sustenance for the Cuban people, yet also demanding the pretense of ideological commitment, the aesthetics of the zombie genre offer much more than new possibilities for repackaging a by-now-well-worn critique. In a personal interview with the film's producer Inti Herrera in 2022, he described *Juan* as

una película que tiene una crítica social evidente, que habla de nuestras realidades. Pero para mí lo más interesante que tiene es que el zombi es un pedazo de la sociedad que está muerto, que no se mueve para ningún lado (a film with an obvious social critique, that talks about our [Cuban] reality. But for me the most interesting thing it has is that the zombie is a part of society that is dead, that isn't moving anywhere) (my translation).

This sense of death in life, of being condemned to remain still like a river stone while the world's currents pass you by is something unique to this island from which tens of thousands of people migrate every year. Juan is condemned to survive, over and over, drawing few distinctions between the Angolan war, the Special Period, and the zombie apocalypse, so that *the notion of survival itself almost becomes the thing he needs to survive*. A Cuban audience understands lack as it is embodied by Juan on multiple levels: in the hunger intimated by his undernourished body, his emotional distance from his companions (why invest in meaningful relationships when everyone you know might leave at a moment's notice), and the stagnation that results from life under a regime that continues to enforce an outdated ideology that positions Cuba as an antagonist against the rest of the world. Zombie horror aesthetics provide a new way for Cuban audiences to connect with these ideas: somatic encounters prompted by the excessive displays of

gore and bodily desecration join together with cognitive reflections of political references and black humor to create a novel filmgoing experience.

Dis/connection: Cuban Speculative Cinema Today

Erick J. Mota, Cuban author and winner of various prizes for science fiction, argues that until very recently the Cuban public has only received positively films that are either localized versions of Hollywood-style genre entertainment or abstract audiovisual art concerned with symbolic language. Films that attempt to do both simultaneously are either dismissed or awarded merit according to their status as only “fiction” rather than “science fiction.” Mota insists that a type of cinema that imagines alternate realities in order to better reflect on our current one is nevertheless necessary, and in a discussion of the recent sci-fi short *Tundra* (Jose Aparicio 2022), he notes that what is of greatest value in this film is that it:

...takes us along a path that calls us to reflect on our attitudes of resignation to the status quo, of apathy toward what is arbitrary, and the abandonment of our dreams. We have felt these sensations in our real universe, nevertheless, in this imaginary one, through our connection with the protagonist, we are led to reflect on our own apathy and lack of hope. (my translation).

Juan exemplifies a similar gesture: even as it presents audiences with a dystopic vision, ultimately it aims to speak to a Cuban audience about the costs of this kind of hunger and lack by utilizing conventions that are new for Cuban cinema. It has helped to pave the way for a slew of recent feature films that utilize science fiction and/or horror genre conventions—films such as Eduardo del Llano’s *Omega 3* (2014), Rafael Ramírez’s *Diario de la Niebla* (2016), Yimit Ramírez’s *Gloria Eterna* (2017), Alejandro Alonso’s *El Proyecto* (2017), Arturo Infante’s *El*

Viaje Extraordinario de Celeste Garcia (2018), and Miguel Coyula's *Corazón Azul* (2021).

Many of these films depict figures who are at odds with their surroundings, unable to emotionally connect, and who embody a deep desire for a true unity between individual identity and the greater social environment. By attending to these films' sensorial appeals in conjunction with their aesthetics and politics, we can deepen our understanding of the kind of sociohistorical work these texts perform, and how Cuban artists and spectators speculate on their place in the world.

Rather than understand science fiction cinema in the Global South as merely derivative of Hollywood sci-fi cinema, or even as local interpretations of global genres, it is more productive to think about Global South cinemas as generators of these genres. Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells argue that "the semantics of SF do not remain stable as the genre travels" and that "the hybrid nature of the genre becomes particularly pronounced when examining SF produced outside of the Anglo-American tradition" (xiv) to the extent that some works might at first glance not seem to qualify as science fiction. This is the case with a film like *The Extraordinary Journey of Celeste Garcia*, a 2018 Cuban film that uses the idea of an alien abduction to structure a narrative about a woman's journey to self-acceptance. Yet rather than undermine these contributions to the genre canon, analysis of these works can reveal the contradictions inherent in the generic forms and help us to reconsider their origins. *The Extraordinary Journey* illustrates the way in which alien invasion/abduction stories are often rooted in a desire to understand one's place in one's environments and communities when faced with the option or obligation to leave that environment. As with *Juan* and many other recent Cuban films, *The Extraordinary Journey* grapples with the themes of distance, separation, and authentic connection to others as a source of personal fulfillment. The protagonist Celeste Garcia, a former

schoolteacher and planetarium guide, is offered a free ride to the distant planet Gryok by her neighbor who turns out to be a Gryokian disguised as a Russian, and she decides to accept in order to leave behind unpleasant memories of her abusive husband. After her attempt to leave is thwarted by a greedy young man and his girlfriend, she returns to her neighborhood but finds happiness with the butcher of the *barrio* who claims he will treat her “like a queen.” Thus, having failed as a wife (she withholds assistance as her abusive husband drowns in a river), as a teacher (her school fires her after she refuses to leave her husband, claiming it sets a bad example for her students), and as a mother (her son is lazy, vain, and does not take care of his mother), her only alternative is to escape to another planet. When she is prevented from leaving the planet, the film’s ending suggests (somewhat unconvincingly) that her true path to happiness lies in gaining better self-acceptance. Like *Juan de los Muertos*, *Celeste Garcia* is a comedy that draws upon science fiction conventions in order to perform a new kind of social critique and highlight aspects of the frustrations and desires of this island’s inhabitants. As opposed to *Juan*, however, *Celeste Garcia*’s use of the genre does not manage to move far beyond an amusing “costume,” as Ronald A. Ramirez acknowledges²⁴. Whereas the zombies overtaking present-day Havana achieve a unique formal and affective impact, this feature-length build up to an alien abduction that never occurs becomes merely an intriguing premise for what is essentially a middle-age *bildungsroman*. At the same time, the film encourages its viewers to ask, what might prompt one to leave everything behind to travel to an unknown place? It is Celeste’s lack of belonging and sense of estrangement from her surroundings that prompts her desire to leave, again echoing the central recurring themes of much recent Cuban cinema.

²⁴ <https://hypermediamagazine.com/critica/tres-operas-primas-cubanas/>

Corazón Azul (2021), an extraordinary effort that took filmmaker Miguel Coyula and his team almost ten years to complete (work on the film began the same year that *Juan* was released), takes the notion of genre hybridity to new heights, being a non-linear dystopian science fiction narrative that is also an erotic noir thriller, and contains sequences with clips from Japanese anime films and classic Soviet cinema. The film plays with the notion of the socialist New Man and imagines an alternate reality in which Fidel Castro's regime collaborates with an American company to genetically engineer a new race of superhuman beings, but the "Guevara experiment" goes awry when the mutants turn out to be uncontrollable and dangerously intelligent, and they form an anarcho-terrorist group that coordinates attacks on governmental institutions, feeling themselves to be outcasts of the society that created them. In a dark and gothic atmosphere, where two of the central settings are the abandoned nuclear power plant near the city of Cienfuegos and the futuristic-looking Art Institute in Havana (the ISA), a story filled with gaps and unresolved tensions develops uneasily. The film follows the protagonist, Elena, one of the experiment's subjects, in her search to uncover her true identity and in the process, reveal the truth behind the government's secret program. As with *Juan*, the central theme of disconnection and the questioning of the costs of mere survival emerges obliquely, alongside a clear critique of the failures of the revolutionary government which allowed for the development of an authoritarian regime, placing the Cuban people always at the mercy of Castro's every whim (some of which were real attempts to venture into the realm of bioengineering).²⁵ Instead of a zombie condemned to survive over and over, here the posthuman figure at the center of the film is the genetically modified superhuman, but like a zombie, Elena is similarly affect-less and

²⁵ One such attempt was Castro's project of breeding a "supercow" that could produce over 100 liters of milk per day: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/military-guards-milking-musichas-any-cow-lived-as-well-as-cubas-ubre-blanca>

unable to emotionally connect with those around her. *Juan de los Muertos*, *Extraordinary Journey*, and *Corazón Azul* all make use of speculative genre conventions to represent figures who are at odds with their surroundings, and who embody a deep longing for a sense of belonging and fulfillment that surpasses mere survival. In doing so, they provide a new framework for perceiving sociopolitical conditions on the island, and at the same time enter into global cinematic exchanges that consider the human cost of oppressive systems and explore alternative networks of interdependence.

Conclusion

Although one might criticize Cuban cinema for its financial dependence on other countries, or for adapting Hollywood-style aesthetics as a perceived dilution of a previously potent and politically committed nationalist cinema, this approach neglects deeper attention to structures of feeling that emerge with and through consumption of popular audiovisual art. One could even venture that mobilizing a zombie aesthetic that combines hunger and lack with spectatorial pleasure is an inherently political act within the Cuban context, given the historical disavowal of entertainment as the primary aim of Cuban cinema. Since the 1990s, Cuban filmmakers have been working at the margins of state institutions and seeking international collaborations, striving to craft a cinema that responds to the twofold demand to both make sense of an internal national reality and connect to currents of estrangement and disconnection in genre cinema across the globe. After the release of *Juan de los muertos*, this process has continued and begun to enliven and enrich genre forms that had previously been dominated by artists in the Global North. The criticism that *Juan de los muertos* and other works of genre fiction are “chavacanería” or vulgar attempts to “prostitute” the basest elements of a national culture stems

from an understandable fear of vulnerability and exposure to dominant global powers, upon whose whims depends the fate of much of the world. Yet vulnerability, as Judith Butler points out, reveals a body's radical dependency on other bodies, its network of relations, and can be mobilized for a coalitional politics that recognizes the simultaneous precarity and agency of all bodies (153). Rather than weaken the position of this national cinema, these networks of dis/connection reveal a potential for agency through exaggerated depictions of vulnerability, which ultimately functions as an ethical call to refuse hunger and insist on surpassing mere survival.

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IV. Voices Haunt the Frame: Decolonial Soundscapes in Jayro Bustamante's *La Llorona*

Unruly, full of desire, unsettling, around the edges of haunting whispers revenge. The rage of the dead, a broken promise, a violent ruin, the seeds of haunting, an engine for curses. It can and cannot be tolerated. Not like justice. Everyone nods their head to justice. Who can disagree with justice? Revenge on the other hand... Revenge is necessarily unspeakable to justice.

- C. Ree & Eve Tuck, "A Glossary of Haunting"

Restricted to channels of official legibility, certain forms of justice can be carried out that are essential for archival memory, the prevention of repeated harm, and access to rights and resources through governmental and other entities. Truth and reconciliation commissions can be found throughout Latin America and have been vital for the investigation of wrongdoing of authoritarian governments and the revelation of forms of collaboration between U.S. agents and Latin American states working against their people. In the face of what legal justice has the capacity to provide, it is logical to ask, as does Mónica Albizúrez Gil, what an imaginative rendering of supernatural vengeance on screen might provide for the inheritors of a legacy of genocide in Guatemala. She argues that the film *La Llorona* (Bustamante 2019) depicts a very limited form of justice because "una venganza espectral no puede cumplir el papel de reparación colectiva indispensable para superar el trauma (a spectral vengeance cannot fulfill the function of collective reparation that is indispensable for overcoming trauma)" (20, translation mine). Yet, as North American Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree suggest in this chapter's epigraph, overcoming trauma is not necessarily always the desired outcome, or not the only one. The notion of revenge as reparation for a trauma on the scale of a genocide seems outlandish and even troubling, yet what it signals is the undesirability of using institutional justice as a means of putting things to rest, of reaching a destination, of some form of "closure" which can only ever

be an illusion. Revenge in the form of an ongoing haunting recognizes that “there is no putting to rest” (Ree & Tuck 648). Even when justice operates as it should, to the benefit of the victims, there are things that still linger outside these channels, traces of harm that cannot be fully redressed. Haunting can thus become a practice, a ritual of refusal, that allows not for the tangible achievement of justice, but for an ongoing, slow, perhaps irrational vengeance against “crimes that are too wrong to right” (Ree & Tuck 654).

Avery Gordon suggests that our task as scholars is to “look for lessons about haunting when there are thousands of ghosts; when entire societies become haunted by terrible deeds that are systematically occurring and are simultaneously denied by every public organ of governance and communication” (64). *La Llorona* tells the story of such terrible deeds and their denial from the perspective of women who suffer a range of consequences as a result—from the direct violence perpetrated on the character of Alma, a Mayan woman who is shot, and on her children who are drowned in a river, turning her into the vengeful spirit of La Llorona, to the wife and daughter of the military dictator who turn a blind eye or are prevented from seeing the crimes of the patriarch, to the granddaughter whose father is presumably killed by the regime. These women do not suffer equally, but their experiences are all to differing extents denied or made to conform to truths externally imposed by public organs of governance (the military and the courts). A supernatural intervention allows what has been made invisible to become tangible; an audiovisual haunting awakens the senses to a different kind of understanding of events, “a feeling of reality” (Gordon 8) which is not necessarily rational, but which opens onto another dimension of knowledge.

In this chapter, I explore what I understand to be the two essential forces that propel the film *La Llorona*: Indigeneity and womanhood, wherein both become a disruption of the

discourse of nation/ality and linear temporality, drawing the past into the present and questioning official narratives. In its use of horror genre elements and haunting aesthetics to formulate critiques of colonialism and state violence, *La Llorona* is aligned with many other works of Fourth Cinema. Alongside the visual depictions of Indigenous women's agency, the film's emphasis on sound unsettles the relationship between vision and knowledge in a critique of colonial visuality that aims to objectify and control Indigenous women's bodies. The disembodied, unlocatable cry of the (female, Indigenous) ghost becomes a threatening rupture of this dominating, hierarchical visuality, offering an alternative perception of historical oppression that acknowledges the importance of the senses for activating cultural memory.

Indigenous knowledge systems often emphasize a sense of time that interweaves past and present so that bodies are perceived as carriers of ancestral knowledge and part of a communal network. Indigenous cinema often utilizes nonlinear storytelling to foreground the continuing impact of the past on the present, and ghosts and specters can become powerful allegories in these films for violent encounters that resulted in the "ghosting" of Native and Aboriginal communities, as Gerry Turcotte notes (9). In *La Llorona*, Mayan identity is made very central through costume, language, and the depiction of spiritual traditions, as a form of defiance against the association of Indigeneity with the primitive, or that which is doomed to be erased as a casualty of modernity. Instead, the ghost that results from a past violence surpasses the "modern" understanding of the *ladino*²⁶ characters and the military, and its revenge transcends the knowledge capacity of the military men who become its victims.

In his analysis of Maya Kaqchikel oral histories, ethnographer/historian David Carey notes that "a fundamental difference in Mayan and Western historical methodology is that Maya

²⁶ A term commonly used in Guatemala which David Carey defines as "nonindigenous Guatemalan; the distinction is based more on cultural, social, and ethnic characteristics than physical appearance or genetics" (276).

relate their history in a cyclical, not a linear, pattern..." (37). In oral retellings of history, events are grouped together in thematic categories rather than told chronologically. Carey points to anthropologist Victoria Bricker's assertion that "'the Maya believed that history was repetitive, that the events in one cycle would be repeated in all successive cycles as they had been repeating since time immemorial.' Consequently, oral history allows Maya not only to recount the past but also to develop strategies for the present and future" (37). This also allows for Mayan groups to maintain a sense of collective identity, in opposition to *ladino*-dominated institutions that "attempt to develop a national identity through an official history that places Mayan origins and realities in a halcyon past" (250). The recuperation of memory, identity, and relation for Maya thus requires stitching back together broken temporal linkages in ways that resist these attempts. Rather than repeat a story of past victimization, *La Llorona* imagines a world where past trauma is embodied as an agentic Indigenous woman and emerges into the present as a force that weeps, unsettles, and disrupts, reorienting both the *ladino* characters and the spectator to an alternative sense of social reality.

Horror cinema provides a means to explore pressing issues related to race, gender, and sexuality, as well as posing challenges to modern colonial discursive frameworks, freed from a responsibility to realism. Yet this film takes a new approach to the genre—although marketed as a horror film, *La Llorona*'s clear references to real historical events move the film beyond the boundaries of classic horror cinema, which has always engaged in some form of social critique that is usually subordinated to its frightening plot and character elements. *La Llorona*'s allegorical narrative maneuvers elements of horror and the supernatural to send an affective political message in which the audience's emotional responses are intended to be *part of* that message. Here, the body's mimetic response to the audiovisual object becomes a mode of

witnessing the ghost, evoking sense memories that “slip from both official history and the audiovisual record” (Marks 26). According to Bustamante in an interview, the film was strategically marketed as a horror film in order to get audiences to the theater, and it reinterprets the myth of La Llorona (well known throughout Central America as the vengeful, weeping woman crying for the death of her children) as the motherland of Guatemala crying for her people and seeking justice for the genocide against the predominantly Mayan rural communities during the Civil War in the 1980s. He notes that “even if it was a fiction, we wanted to make a kind of catharsis.”²⁷ My interest lies in considering both how the film engages a history of violence against the Indigenous through the haunting feminine figure of La Llorona using genre film techniques, and how the film aims to haunt its spectators through its jarring use of the acoustic register to make felt ongoing traumatic memories not accounted for in official records or documentary realism.

The Intrusion of the Woman’s Voice

The film opens with a close-up on the gaunt, pale face of Carmen (the dictator’s wife) as she stares directly at the viewer and whispers a prayer, and then the camera very slowly zooms out to show a circle of women praying along with her. The women surrounding Carmen—light skinned, upper-class *ladinas*—are holding their hands a centimeter apart, gathered around a table with lit candles in a chiaroscuro setting where the dominant colors are grey, white, and beige. Carmen is positioned in the center and is the only figure with a frontal gaze as she pleads: “we have need of your strength, come to us, speak for us, protect us, hear for us, feel for us, take us, bring us, take us, bring us” (02:30—02:50). As the camera pulls back, the whispering increases

²⁷ <https://deadline.com/2021/01/la-llorona-director-jayro-bustamante-embraces-genre-elements-to-frame-impact-of-guatemalan-genocide-contenders-international-1234668080/>

in intensity, and then some other sounds are overlaid, first of echoing and crying, which gradually become words spoken in an Indigenous language (for which no subtitles are given) but which are implied to be in La Llorona's voice. La Llorona's lament overtakes the white women's prayer circle, foreshadowing the film's climax, and her disembodied emergence seems to be a response to the prayers, assuming the voice of a vengeful god. Yet the words being spoken here are less important than the sound they make, which becomes almost oceanic in its rushing and echoing, increasing in desperation until it almost makes one want to stop one's ears, ending in a shrill whine as the scene is finally cut. The climactic scene mirrors this opening scene, as it is also a prayer circle of women with lit candles, except this time it is led by Valeriana, the Kaqchikel-speaking²⁸ maid who is the keeper of spiritual knowledge beyond what the Monteverde family can conceive. It is Valeriana's words that help to channel La Llorona's power through the body of Carmen, who strangles her own husband in a final act of revenge, and the final shot of the film is a black screen across which an unseen La Llorona screams in voiceover (also in Kaqchikel). The scenes that bookend the film thus introduce La Llorona's power as a voice that ruptures the narrative as well as the visual field, creating uncertainty about what is diegetic or non-diegetic sound.

La Llorona continues with a fictional dramatization of the 2013 trial of Jose Efraín Ríos Montt, the military dictator of Guatemala between 1982 and 1983. The fictional stand-in for Ríos Montt is a character named Enrique Monteverde. Mirroring real events, the film depicts the court's conviction of the dictator's actions as genocidal crimes against humanity, and the subsequent overturning of that ruling by the Constitutional Court of Guatemala. Ríos Montt's retrial began in January 2015, but the court ruled that because he suffered from dementia he

²⁸ Also spelled Kachiquel, this is a language spoken by the third largest Mayan ethnic group in Guatemala.

could not be sentenced, and Rios Montt died a few months later before the trial could be completed. The film imagines Rios Montt/Monteverde's life in the days after his conviction is overturned, forced into house arrest with his wife, daughter and granddaughter with a bodyguard for their protection, as protesters crowd around his estate, chanting and shouting angrily. Instead of suffering a gradual descent into dementia, the fictional film depicts Monteverde as being haunted by the spirit of La Llorona, who enters the domestic space first as a disembodied voice, softly and eerily crying. After all the household staff (Indigenous Kaqchikel-speakers) leave because they are aware of the terrifying nature of the house's ghost—all except Valeriana, the loyal head servant—another domestic servant from Valeriana's home village is sent for, and Alma arrives in the Monteverde household. She appears quiet and meek at first, a short young woman with long black hair and traditional Mayan dress, but as the film progresses, it becomes clear that Alma is the embodiment of the tormented spirit. The film centers on the women of the household: Monteverde's wife Carmen, their daughter Natalia, and Natalia's daughter Sara, as well as Valeriana and Alma, the two Indigenous maids. Carmen gradually moves from staunch defender of her husband to a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown as the haunting presence grows and begins to take over her body and unravel her both physically and mentally. Natalia, at first isolated from her father's evil deeds, begins to question his involvement in the genocide and sexual violence, and eventually learns that Valeriana is her half-sister (Monteverde's daughter by an Indigenous woman whom he may have raped). In the film's climactic scene, Alma/La Llorona acquires full possession of Carmen's body and forces her to relive the drowning of Alma's two children that occurred in the past at the hands of Monteverde and his men, followed by Alma's own murder. Carmen pleads with Monteverde in Alma's voice, then the camera shows Monteverde holding a gun and we hear a gunshot, followed by Carmen's

slow turn to see Alma lying on the ground with a gunshot wound in her forehead, her dark hair spread out in the river water. In an eerie silence, Carmen then strangles Monteverde within her vision/timewarp/bodily possession (1:25:15–1:27:22), but she in fact strangles him in the film’s diegetic present.

The murder of the former dictator is the moment of emotional catharsis that Bustamante creates for his film’s Guatemalan audience, which has been denied a concrete form of legal justice for the crimes perpetrated by Montt’s regime. It is also a form of contesting denials of past violence through strong, affective imagery, despite the scene’s speculative and fantastical nature. As Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Peterson assert in their discussion of the “haunting aesthetic” in Latin American literature and cinema, this aesthetic choice “operate[s] with an indirect, deliberately unrealistic approach that acknowledges the difficulty of narrativizing the past” and in addition

...its emphasis on the aftereffects of violence establishes affective links between past and present as well as the availability of this past to be repaired by a discursive act of justice.

The aesthetic of...haunting...place[s] into question the notion of an accessible past as well as its related realistic aesthetics. (8)

La Llorona’s possession of Carmen’s body creates a link between events that occurred in the historical past (1982–1983) and the diegetic present (2013) and reinscribes the prior instance of racist violence on the white bodies of Carmen and her granddaughter, Sara, who begins to asphyxiate during the murder scene as if she is one of the drowning children. The subsequent murder of Monteverde at the hands of Carmen is framed as a reparative and justifiable act, one which the spectator is encouraged to desire and relish, feeling a release of accumulated anger and horror. However, in the film’s final sequence, another military general close to Monteverde is

shown entering a restroom after Monteverde's funeral, where he hears a mysterious crying sound, then looks down to see the bathroom floor flooding with water. Over a final black screen, we hear what we now know to be La Llorona's voice scream out in Kaqchikel "My children!" (01:29:18). These final moments suggest that the trauma has not been fully repaired, and that La Llorona has more to avenge. Her final cry is one of ongoing agony, not victory, and thus the viewer comes away from the film still unsettled. The black screen across which the cry is aurally shattered reminds us of the limitations of the visual to transmit a sense of unresolved pain.

La Llorona/Alma rarely speaks, but her unsettling corporeality and her associations with specific soundscapes (moans, crying, whispers, and water sounds) situate her as a counterpart to the oral testimonies given by the veiled women in the courtroom who testify to the military's crimes against humanity in the first part of the film. She represents what cannot be named, what cannot be fully conceived in words or images but must be transmitted as an emotional resonance. The sound of a leaking faucet coupled with ghostly cries awaken Monteverde at night twice: once towards the beginning of the film, and again about halfway through. Quiet sobs lead him to blindly search through his house, the familiar made suddenly strange to him. The disembodied voice makes it seem as if the house itself is the ghost, and the sound we hear is the unified voice of a collectivity in mourning, the guttural moans testifying to the injustices perpetrated against the victims of genocide. Water not only recalls the original La Llorona mythology as well as that of La Siguanaba²⁹, it also brings to mind the metaphor used to justify the destruction of Mayan

²⁹ Mónica Albizúrez Gil observes "Si la Llorona es la mujer que ahogó sus hijos al ser abandonada por el marido y recorre, vestida de negro y en llanto, lugares acuáticos por la culpa, la Siguanaba encarna la mujer que vestida de blanco y de larga cabellera, seduce los hombres infieles, quienes al acercarse a ella, descubren un rostro de bestia. La Siguanaba también deambula en lugares asociados al agua." (If La Llorona is the woman who drowned her children after being abandoned by her husband, and who traverses aquatic places in shame, dressed in black and in sobs, La Siguanaba embodies the woman who, dressed in white and with long hair, seduces unfaithful men, who when they approach discover the face of a beast. La Siguanaba also wanders in places associated with water.) (14, translation mine).

villages: during the scene of the trial, Monteverde is quoted as saying “the people are to the guerrilla as water is to fish—if you want to get rid of the fish, you have to get rid of the water,” (20:24) which was a sentiment expressed by the real dictator Rios Montt. The sounds of water are therefore both affectively and cognitively associated with the systematic extermination of the Mayan people during Rios Montt’s seventeen-month tenure in which entire villages were drained of life, and at the same time an aural signal of unresolved pain that overflows visual, temporal, and legal boundaries. Water can also be understood as a signifier of Indigenous resistance, particularly given the recent resurgence of struggles over water and land rights in Guatemala.³⁰ The slow flooding unsettles the notion of an impermeable boundary between past and present, and the persistent leakage points to the impossibility of erasing the ghost, who always finds a way in. The sound of dripping, then running water becomes a recurring motif that signals both the historical violence against the Maya but also the vengeance yet to come.

Decolonial philosopher María del Rosario Acosta López examines a variety of instances of traumatic violence throughout the Western hemisphere which she understands “as colonizing, because *it is not only an assault on life but on the conditions of production of sense that make life legible*” wherein sense is interpreted as “both the modes of perception and the conceptual structures that are required for any form of listening to be even possible” (208, emphasis in original). Listening to memories of trauma, she argues, requires an acknowledgment of the colonial structuring of the senses that make certain things, and not others, audible. Too often, because of the “catastrophes of meaning” (Nelly Richard qtd. in Acosta López 213) occasioned by traumatic violence, the recounting of that violence is perceived as inaudible or unrecognizable, and therefore different “grammars of listening” are required (Acosta López

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/mar/26/santa-rita-green-dam-killings-indigenous-people-guatemala>

213). These “grammars of listening” are a means of producing “modes of remembrance and possibilities of historical indexation whose criterion is not the verification of the past and the dependence on the archive, but the opening in the present of a space of credibility for the production of a past that has not yet been worked-through” (216-17). Bustamante’s film skillfully confronts the viewer with a demand for the recognition of trauma as it has not yet been worked-through, a form of making audible the inaudible. The irruption of the feminine, Indigenous cry emerges from a “zone of nonbeing” (Fanon qtd. in Acosta López 217) to confront the spectator/listener with a form of memory that has been rendered non-sensical by colonial grammars of sense.

After Monteverde collapses during the trial and is taken to a hospital, it is reported on the television that the constitutional court has annulled the trial against the former dictator, stating the impossibility of proving that there was a genocide. From this point on in the film, the sound of voices collectively raised in protest becomes near-constant background noise for every daytime scene. The cacophony assaults the Monteverdes most aggressively when they are in the ambulance driving from the hospital to their estate. In this sequence, Carmen and Natalia crouch inside the white van around Enrique Monteverde who is on a stretcher, cramped within a small space as the protestors’ hands drum loudly on the van, creating a tone of rising panic, increasing in volume as the van approaches the house’s entryway (29:00). Once the van door opens, the family is immediately assailed by a mass of bodies who scream and pelt them with animal blood, waving flags and flyers with pictures of those disappeared and killed by the military regime. The constant shouts, chants (often of “asesino/murderer”), and drumming of the protestors serve as a reminder to the viewer that the horror has already happened, but the retribution is yet to arrive. The protestor’s angry shouts emphasize the desire for justice that remains. The feeling of anger

to which the film is attuned is not merely excessive or gratuitous, but tied to a historically specific cause, and even though it cannot provide a clear path to reparations and legal justice, I argue that it is nevertheless useful as a way of acknowledging embodied memory and what remains outside the written and visual archive. The sensorially jarring moans, whispers, water sounds, and chanting “provide an outlet for the affective charge of memory and reckoning” (64) as Laura Podalsky observes in her examination of Latin American post-dictatorship genre films. Like the films Podalsky analyzes, *La Llorona* creates a space in which to “attend to epistemic possibilities of the sensorium and acknowledge a sense for the past that exceeds the merely rational” (65).

Sound, as Elsaesser and Hagener argue, “‘embodies’ the image” because while “seeing is always directional...hearing is always a three-dimensional, spatial perception, that is it creates an acoustic space, because we hear in all directions” (154). Sound also possesses haptic and tactile qualities because it is emitted in waves, which must touch our eardrums and make them vibrate, and therefore “sound covers and uncovers, touches and enfolds even the spectator’s body” (Elsaesser and Hagener 155) in ways that can be especially disorienting when the origin of the sound is not locatable, as often occurs in horror films. Kaja Silverman’s work on gender, sound, and images in the cinema is foundational for Ana Forcinito’s scholarship on post-dictatorship Argentinian cinema, and Forcinito notes that for Silverman, the woman’s voice is often completely fixed to the body, or perfectly synchronized, in contrast to the man’s voice which is more often able to transcend the body (often in the form of voiceover). “This transcendence assigns authority to the voice uncoupled from the body and tied to the logos (the voice as narrative authority, or even as reason, as articulated, paternal language)” (Forcinito 13). Forcinito argues that this logocentric regime is destabilized by films that employ a feminist approach

through disruptions of continuity between sound and image. La Llorona's transcendent voice, which is often not fixed to a body or even linguistically intelligible, acts upon the spectator's body while dismantling patriarchal distinctions between subject and object, body and voice. It is a voice that invades the household and destabilizes the paternal order wherein Enrique Monteverde is the arbiter of "truth" as a function of what must be silenced.

The relationship between voice and embodiment is also interrogated in the scene during which an unnamed, veiled Mayan woman gives testimony in the courtroom and recounts her experience of the destruction of her village and her sexual violation by soldiers (which I will discuss in greater detail later on). Her veil prevents her from being identified during her testimony, and the interpretation of her speech into Spanish by a male interpreter adds another level of distancing from her personal experience. Yet her clothing connects her to the large group of women in the audience who all wear almost identical veils, and rather than undermine the authority of the woman's testimony, the collectivity of Indigenous women projects a hyper-visible, unified strength. In so doing, the woman's voice is not reduced to "mere corporeality" (Forcinito 23), an object more readily manipulated by a masculine gaze, but instead it becomes a transcendent and *plural* voice. Forcinito contends that in certain films, the acoustic realm can contain its own logic that circumvents that of the patriarchy. She notes that voice and sound in the cinema can

invite us to pass over the threshold of the visible world...to invisible worlds erased by violence, abjection, and marginalization and languages that cannot be translated into the rigid grammar of heteronormative masculinity. Those worlds often remain outside the visual field and are made present as shouts, singing, distortions of the voice, whispers, sighs, and panting, which frequently indicate the dislocation of images. (4)

As a correlate to the accusatory, transcendent feminine voice in the courtroom, the disembodied whispers, moans, and cries of La Llorona that weave throughout the film signal the invisibilized and repressed experiences of Indigenous women that are impossible to translate or transcribe.

After the testimony, the judge rules in favor of the victims, but that ruling is shortly afterwards annulled by the Constitutional Court, something we learn along with Natalia who watches a news report from inside the hospital, about twenty-seven minutes into the film. Yet La Llorona has already begun her haunting of Monteverde even before the trial commences, emphasizing the notion that despite the act of truth-telling, despite processes of reconciliation and “redemocratization,” the ghosts created by unthinkable atrocities can never be put to rest. This particular ghost is necessarily gendered female due to what Jean Franco describes as the logic of “extreme masculinity,” which in Guatemala drove rape to become a “crucial and symbolic weapon” for the subjugation of victims during the war, reinforcing the status of women as less-than-human (15). The erasure of this reality is shown in the film to initiate with a hyper-visual masculinity that sets the terms for historical accounting: in the second scene, Monteverde’s lawyer speaks to Monteverde and a group of older men in suits (presumably other members of the military leadership) who drink liquor and smoke cigars in a darkly lit, wood-paneled room. He advises them on how to present themselves in court in a manner that upholds the desired narrative that they are “irreproachable” and “heroes” (04:05), with details about their dress as specific as the type of tie they should wear, and exhorts them to not, under any circumstances, “bow their heads” (04:10). The camera stays in medium close-up throughout the scene, in which the men sit or stand very closely together, suggesting a narrow, claustrophobic framing of events that shuts out other possible interpretations of their actions. It is this patriarchal

atmosphere of repression and domination that becomes destabilized by the introduction of the unsettling female voice.

Disembodied sound and inarticulate noise link La Llorona/Alma and the protestors, as the former penetrates the house's insides, and the latter bombards the house from outside. Beginning with the sequence wherein Monteverde and his family are transported from the hospital to their estate and continuing until the dictator's fatal strangulation, the clamor of the protestors (which alternates between recognizable chants and noise) is constantly in the background of the diegesis. The uncategorizable, unlocalizable nature of these sounds is precisely what lends them potency—they disrupt an audiovisual regime that demands intelligibility. The film's strategic sound design and sensorial excess stage a political intervention by destabilizing imposed narratives (that the nation has “moved on” and that the violent events remain in the past) and gesturing towards unassimilable emotions. In one scene that is almost comical for its portrayal of the family's willful dissociation from Monteverde's violent actions, Natalia is outside in the yard sitting on a lawn chair in a meditative lotus pose with her back to the camera, wearing athletic clothes, while the loud chants of the protestors overwhelm the acoustic space. Her position and clothing suggest an active repudiation of concern for the protestors and a focus on her own “wellness.” Carmen arrives and asks Natalia to examine her red-rimmed eyes, which Natalia (who is a doctor) immediately diagnoses as conjunctivitis. Carmen's request suggests that her unwillingness to “see” the truth is what is being gradually eroded by her nightly visions, in which she becomes Alma and is forced to run from soldiers with her children. The visual regime in which outside and inside, lived experience and imposed narratives, are clearly delineated, is dissolved through both the ghost's and the protestors' visual and sonic disruptions.

The reimagining of La Llorona as a symbol of the motherland that seeks revenge for the death of her children is a subversive revision of typical depictions of motherhood within the horror film. As Erin Harrington notes, the horror film participates in negotiating and shaping discourses of normative motherhood, often suggesting that “there is something specific about motherhood itself that is (and that makes women) monstrous” (181). For Harrington, a recurring type of mother in horror films is the one who goes to extremes to “save, protect, or avenge” her child, demonstrating the constant “interplay between idealised and transgressive motherhood” in which self-sacrifice is demanded from a “good” mother, but only within socially defined parameters (183). In Bustamante’s film, there are three representations of mothers: Alma, Carmen, and Natalia. It is Alma’s grief over the loss of her children that leads her to transform into a vengeful ghost, and that drives her to develop a protective relationship with Sara (Natalia’s daughter), whom she teaches to hold her breath underwater in order to avoid the fateful drowning undergone by her own children at the hands of the military. For Carmen, mothering consists of shielding her daughter Natalia from the truth of the sexual violence perpetrated by her father, attempting to enforce her complicity with misogynist narratives of Indigenous women’s sexual licentiousness informed by an outlook of class and racial superiority. Yet this attempt fails because of Natalia’s gradual awakening to the realities of her father’s crimes (achieved through her exposure to the court testimony, as well as through her witnessing of her father’s attempts to violate Alma), which culminate in an attempt to kill his own granddaughter, thinking that she is a “guerrilla” hiding under the water. In protecting her child, Natalia turns against her father, and symbolically against the patriarchal military regime that systematically aimed to deny the experience of women against whom unspeakable violence was committed. Thus, although the narrative centers on motherhood as an essential element of female identity, motherhood is

simultaneously transformed into a motive for resistance against patriarchal, oppressive systems. If the trope of female monstrosity in classic horror cinema tends to underscore how motherhood, as “something that is coded as feminine, embodied and Other, serves to prop up patriarchal systems of knowledge and power” (Harrington 184), then here we see the monstrous maternal employed instead as a feminist strategy to expose the violence of those systems.

Indigeneity, Haunting, and Horror

Like much of recent Guatemalan artistic production, this film is haunted by the violent events of the last half of the 20th century, but it distinguishes itself through its women-centered narrative, its focus on Indigeneity, and its direct engagement with the horror genre via a folkloric figure of deep cultural importance. Rios Montt’s bloody regime was short, but his was just the last of a long series of right-wing military dictatorships that began with General Ydigoras Fuentes in the late 1950s. Guatemala’s nation-building project had the twin goals of abolishing communism and becoming a modern nation, and Indigenous people were cast as enemies to be eliminated in the pursuit of both goals, as they were deemed susceptible to siding with communist guerrillas as well as opposed to modernization. As Jean Franco explains,

[...] the urgency of modernization transposed racism into a different key and turned the indigenous from an exploited labor force into a negative and undesirable mass. The doctrine of developmentalism widely disseminated after the Second World War emphasized the independent self-determined individual. By contrast, the basis of indigenous life was the community, which for the modernizing intellectual was an anachronism. During the civil wars of the 1980s, the Guatemalan military targeted the

indigenous, whose extermination or forced assimilation was deemed essential to the thorough overhaul of the state in the name of modernization. (8)

The genocide carried out against these groups also had a distinctly gendered dimension, given the systematic practice of rape and torture of women and the brutal killing of children, as has been well documented in the Guatemalan report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) titled *Memoria del silencio* (adapted and translated into English as *Memory of Silence* by Anna Kushner and Daniel Rothenberg).³¹ Indigenous women were seen as the means of reproducing the very ethnic difference that the modern state wanted to eliminate, and their children were therefore the seeds of that difference. Franco notes, “rape was a calculated act that targeted monolingual women *wearing traditional dress and speaking indigenous languages*, for women as bearers of tradition must be incapacitated or destroyed in the cause of creating a new Guatemala cleared of the guerrillas and ethnic difference” (83-4, emphasis mine). Mayan women and children were thus cast as the monstrous Other by the Guatemalan state, the evil to be purged. This history undergirds the story of *La Llorona*, in which women and children drive the narrative and Mayan ethnic identities are foregrounded through the prominence of Indigenous language, spirituality, and clothing. While Alma is at first presented as the film’s threatening monster, by the end of the film she becomes the means through which a coalition of the Monteverde women and Valeriana come together to defeat and expel the real monster—the murderous, white, male Monteverde. The use of Indigenous language and traditional clothing

³¹ According to the CEH there were 9,411 female victims of human rights violations between the years of 1962-1996, during the internal armed conflict. There were 1,465 documented cases of rape, and in 25% of these cases, victims were arbitrarily executed. 89 percent of the documented rape victims were Mayan, 10 percent were Latina, and 1 percent belonged to other groups. Two-thirds were adult women (between 18-60 years old), a third were girls (newborns to seventeen years old), and 3 percent were elderly. Rothenberg, Daniel. *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report*. 1st edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 54.

additionally serve to distinguish the domestic servants from the Monteverde family and to align them with the Mayan women who testify against Monteverde in court. Carmen's dismissive attitude toward both her domestic servants and the witnesses is representative of the racist and hierarchical structures dominant in Guatemalan society, which makes the later use of her body as a vessel for the spirit's revenge an effective political gesture. The murder of Monteverde at the hands of Carmen is a clearly allegorical act, but nevertheless one that creates a visceral recognition of violence against the Indigenous, and at the same time demands the intervention of white women in the pursuit of justice. Yet these women are likely to remain haunted beyond the death of the patriarch, as the final sequence implies.

In this construction of an interethnic female coalition, the spiritual knowledge of Indigenous characters is positioned as essential for resisting patriarchal and colonial logics. While this alignment of the spiritual and supernatural with Indigeneity constitutes a spectacle for the film audience, it also reifies the schism between those in power and those Mayan groups who suffered the worst effects from the armed conflict: the Monteverde family is unable to fully conceptualize the effects of the violence until they are literally made to feel it, first through the protestors' chants and shouts, then through the spirit's haunting and later bodily possession. The use of Indigenous language is one mechanism for emphasizing this disconnect. The first time we hear Indigenous language being spoken in the film, it is early on, when the Monteverde family is preparing for the trial. It is nighttime, and Valeriana, the maid, prays to her ancestors while lighting candles and speaking in Kaqchikel. She demonstrates a syncretic religious practice that incorporates both Mayan symbols as well as the Christian sign of the cross, praying for the protection of the household and the banishment of evil. Soon afterwards, Monteverde is awakened from sleep by the sound of crying and running water, causing him to grab his gun and

stalk the house in search of the intruder, whereupon he almost shoots his own wife by accident. When the household staff are later gathered together to be questioned by the family about their knowledge of this event, Kaqchikel is spoken again as the Indigenous servants speculate amongst themselves about the identity of the mysterious intruder. They seem to grasp her identity as La Llorona immediately as well as her proximity to the house (“it was her” says one, “did he hear her far or near?” asks another, and when the first one answers “close to his ear,” the second one responds, “then she is not near”) (12:43–12:55). The film provides subtitles here for the audience, but the Monteverde family themselves are not able to understand the Indigenous language, and Valeriana deflects when entreated to translate. Thus, within the first fifteen minutes of the film, we are given to understand that the Indigenous characters have a special affinity with spiritual and supernatural forces that the *ladino* characters do not have and are incapable of comprehending fully. The emphasis on ethnic difference through language and dress constitutes a defiant confrontation of anti-Indigenous sentiments, which seek to erase that difference and build an ethnically homogeneous nation.

Traditional clothing is used in the film to illustrate Indigenous female strength and unity. The courtroom scene contains noteworthy costuming, color, and lighting, particularly when a Mayan woman gives testimony about the violence inflicted upon her by Monteverde’s soldiers. Creating a stark contrast with the drained white, grey, dark blue, and black colors worn by the Monteverde women, the (unnamed) woman who testifies is dressed in traditional clothing with beautiful, riotous colors, and a blue semitransparent veil with gold embroidery. Her veiled face takes up most of the screen in a close-up that begins the scene, which then continues in a long take as she speaks, the camera very slowly zooming out. According to Albizúrez Gil’s personal correspondence with the film’s costume designer Sofía Latán, this is a traditional dress of the

Nebaj village, located within the department of El Quiché, part of the Ixil area where the majority of the genocide was carried out, and “consequently, this choice ‘was an homage to the ancestral women’ who suffered violence during the armed conflict.” (Albizúrez Gil 9, my translation). The woman speaks in her native language with a Spanish interpreter, testifying to the burning of her village and the sexual assault perpetrated by soldiers, and finishes her testimony by lifting her veil, declaring “I am not ashamed to come and tell you what I lived through, I hope that you are not ashamed to do justice” (18.38–19.03). This enormously symbolic act of lifting the veil coupled with the exhortation that the legal system be unashamed implies that there has been concealment on the part of the judicial system in relation to the crimes of the armed conflict against indigenous women (impunity/amnesty) and, at the same time, opens the possibility of recuperating or recovering that nation in the act of justice, which would be a condemnatory sentence and reparations. (Albizúrez Gil 11, my translation)

As the camera moves back, the Indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú and the white anthropologist Alejandra Colom are revealed to be sitting directly behind the woman testifying. The presence of these two important real-life political figures indicates a “metadiscursive narrative” which results in “the validation of an ethnic and political alliance in the cultural memory[...]of the trial” (Albizúrez Gil 11, my translation). As such, while the fictional trial emphasizes the importance of testimony as a way of giving voice to the oppressed, it also reinforces the role of the white intellectual as ally. The courtroom scene anticipates the ethnic and political alliance enacted in the climactic scene that results in the death of the dictator; the vengeance envisioned by the film is one in which the oppressed Mayans are given voice and their experiences are validated, undergirded by women-led ethnic and class alliances. Ultimately,

retribution is not only sought by the Indigenous, but by all the female characters who to varying degrees have been wronged by the dictatorship: a coalition is needed to bring together forces strong enough to defeat the twin evils of state-sanctioned violence and misogyny, embodied by the character of Enrique Monteverde.

The connection between Indigenous people and the supernatural is a trope of Hollywood genre films, but here it takes on a unique dimension by becoming a means to exert Indigenous agency against patriarchal state oppression. As Native North American scholars such as Philip J. Deloria, Joanna Hearne, and Michelle Raheja have noted, Hollywood films often position indigenous lifeways as an exotic deviation from the white, Eurocentric norm. Stereotypical representations of ‘Indianness’ highlight cultural difference either derogatorily, showing Indigenous worldviews to be anachronistic and alien to modernity, or in the best of cases romanticized with little regard for authenticity. In many instances Native Americans in Hollywood serve the purpose of reifying the myth of white dominance, wherein the ‘white savior’ is the rightful inheritor and preserver of Native knowledge, given the perceived inevitable extinction of Native cultures. The image of the isolated and wise old medicine man or shaman usually serves to help along a white character on their spiritual journey (as in for example Darren Aronofsky’s 2006 film *The Fountain*) but is rarely shown to be a vital part of a thriving community that acknowledges the present connections between people, land, and spirit. Much recent scholarship has analyzed the use of ‘spectrality’ in Indigenous filmmaking to emphasize these connections, and to counter stereotypes of the ‘vanishing Indian’ by highlighting the continuance of ancestral knowledge in the present.³²

³² See for example Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010) and Joanna Hearne, *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

An example of the latter mode of film production is *Before Tomorrow*, a 2009 film produced by the Igloolik women's collective Arnait Video Productions (based in Nunavut, Canada), which retells an ancient story as a means for passing on important Inuit tribal knowledge and history to viewers. Using digital video to revitalize older traditions of oral storytelling, *Before Tomorrow* is a story told by the wise-woman Ningiuq of the death of her community through disease, wrought by the colonial encounter. Although it is a story of the death of an Inuit community, the ghosts that populate it are a potent symbol of resistance against colonial narratives of erasure. In the film, the central character Ningiuq passes on her knowledge to her grandson, not a white settler protagonist, and at the same time she demonstrates traditional skills such as the use of the seal-oil lamp and the use of Inuktitut language to the film viewers, in direct defiance of the prevalent notion of Indigenous extinction. As Dianne Chisholm argues, by reappearing amongst living characters to share traditional knowledge, "the ghosts of *Before Tomorrow* overshadow the spectral images of Inuit life that occupy colonial archives as documentary evidence of a deceased or surpassed existence" (214). While it might seem counterintuitive to employ ghosts in the service of resisting colonial erasure, insisting on the presence of absent loved ones in the context of the Guatemalan process of historical reckoning is an essential strategy when for many years the evidence of their murders was suppressed or ignored.

While archival evidence of death and violence tends to reify a narrative of Indigenous victimhood, forms of storytelling that incorporate haunting aesthetics and the supernatural, such as in both *La Llorona* and *Before Tomorrow*, can instead reinforce notions of Indigenous resilience and strength in the past and present. Although made in a different context than *Before Tomorrow* and adding the element of horror, *La Llorona* similarly engages the myth of the

vanishing native through its cinematic ghost. The specter of La Llorona can likewise be figured as, like Turcotte argues in relation to Australian Aboriginal films that also feature ghosts, “both insurrection and resurrection” of the dead, a supernatural symbol with a political imperative (9). In Bustamante’s film, the Mayan people are positioned as key to not only understanding present political and social reality but also laying claim to a future in which perpetrators of violence against their communities must face consequences.

Bustamante’s choice to utilize horror genre conventions in a film that reckons with a history of gendered and racial violence is particularly noteworthy given this genre’s complex relation to gender, sexuality, and race. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have analyzed the ways in which classic horror films (predominantly European and U.S.-made, and directed by men) allowed viewers to experience the destruction of oppressive patriarchal and heterosexual norms, even as they were reasserted by the end of the film. Many scholars of the monstrous and the Gothic in cinema and literature have similarly pointed out the double function of the monster as both a disciplinary and a subversive figure. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal study on the Gothic, she refers to it as “an aesthetic of pleasurable fear,” referring to the combination of desire and fear in relation to an Other that the Gothic inspires (vi). Often this pleasurable fear is motivated by a monstrous female figure, as occurs in *La Llorona* when Alma lures Monteverde to her through the sound of her voice and appears to him wearing a wet white dress that clings to her body as she combs her long, wet hair³³. Jack Halberstam builds upon Sedgwick’s work by suggesting that this aesthetic “makes pleasure possible only by fixing horror elsewhere, in an

³³ Alma also contains echoes of “Aura,” the titular character of a novella by Carlos Fuentes who is a spectral presence that achieves carnality in order to seduce the male protagonist Felipe, in an exploration of the historical traces of the French Intervention in Mexico.

obviously and literally foreign body, and by then articulating the need to expel the foreign body” thereby reasserting the power of normative and disciplined sexuality over the reader (13).

In canonical Gothic works, the focus on monstrous sexuality tends to subsume histories of class, race, and nationalism. This can be illustrated by the emblematic Gothic novel, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, in which the vampire Count Dracula leaves his distant foreign abode to come to England, becoming a sexual threat to the English female protagonist Lucy Westenra.

Halberstam argues that Count Dracula

merges Jewishness and monstrosity and represents this hybrid monster as a threat to Englishness and English womanhood in particular. In the Jew, then, Gothic fiction finds a monster versatile enough to represent fears about race, nation, and sexuality, a monster who combines in one body fears of the foreign and the perverse. (14)

The vampire is ultimately vanquished through the scientific and rational prowess of Dr. Van Helsing, who claims that the only way to ensure the complete destruction of the vampire is to bury it in the dirt of its home country (Romania), thus reifying the necessity of securing the boundaries of a distinctly non-Jewish national identity through the defense and control of white womanhood and ‘normal’ sexuality. Just as the Jews in 19th century Europe were subject to internal colonization, so were Guatemalan Indigenous populations in the late 20th century. Yet *La Llorona* (which according to Bustamante was partially inspired by characterizations of Dracula) turns the Gothic horror genre on its head: whereas traditional Gothic texts contain a monstrous figure that threatens the security and unity of the domestic sphere (a metonymy for the nation), here the monster (the ghostly figure of Alma/La Llorona) provides the means through which the family can come together to expel the one who represents the real evil: General Monteverde, who represents the state. This becomes a symbolic gesture of

reincorporating the ‘foreign’ within the national body in a female white and Indigenous alliance. The seeming external threat that invades the domestic sphere thus reveals and exorcizes the internal threat that was already present.

The film’s insistence on seeking an Indigenous-led interethnic female alliance to combat patriarchal violence also gestures toward the disruption of oppositional categories of tradition versus modernity, past versus present, and Indigenous versus white. This binary logic is a remnant of coloniality, a repressive epistemological framework that has for centuries systematically denied agency and subjectivity to Indigenous and enslaved people, reducing them to “less than human primitives, satanically possessed, infantile, aggressively sexual, and in need of transformation” (Lugones 747). This logic unfortunately persists in much of recent cinema, a pertinent example being the film *The Curse of La Llorona*, directed by Michael Chaves, released in the U.S. the same year as Bustamante’s film and inspired by the same folk legend. *The Curse*, rather than attempt to problematize the monstrous figure, takes its monstrosity at face value and La Llorona becomes nothing more than a horrifying bogeyman attempting to kill the children of the white female protagonist. In addition, in a similar gesture to the aforementioned *Dracula*, there is a suggestion that the monster arrives in the U.S. from Mexico in the form of a Mexican immigrant woman, mirroring the novel’s xenophobia and positioning Mexican immigration as threatening to U.S. white motherhood. By contrast, Bustamante’s film uses the monster at its center as a site through which to critique systems of power and address wrongs committed against Indigenous women. It also embraces the ethnic heterogeneity of Guatemalan society as a valuable asset in the struggle against patriarchal, colonial violence.

As Alma’s name suggests—the Spanish word “alma” translates to “soul”—she is the soul of the body politic, the conscience of the nation. Given that her body is that of an Indigenous

woman, the film highlights the importance of Indigenous culture to the past and present of Guatemala. Whereas the bodies of Indigenous women were violated by Rios Montt's soldiers, here an Indigenous woman penetrates the dictator's house, ostensibly a place of privacy and security. Much like the water element that she is associated with, she overflows the boundaries that would keep her constrained within the roles of servant or seductress, and she embodies both the threat of death as well as lifegiving possibilities. At first, she appears threatening in her interactions with Sara, the granddaughter, as when Natalia finds her holding Sara's head under water in the sink, but then Sara explains that Alma is teaching her how to hold her breath underwater. We later learn that Alma's children were drowned by soldiers, so her efforts with Sara are revealed to be benign, aimed at helping Sara to avoid the same fate. This duality is an essential part of the La Llorona mythology. Gloria Anzaldúa traces a genealogy of the Mexican version of La Llorona back to the precolombian goddess Coatlicue, the Serpent deity, one of whose descendants is Cihuacoatl, the patron of midwives. Cihuacoatl covers herself in chalk, dresses herself in white, and wanders at night, wailing and foretelling the coming of war. Cihuacoatl and Tonantsi were both aspects of Coatlicue, the former the darker aspect and the latter the lighter aspect, but according to Anzaldúa,

the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and under-world (dark) aspects.

(Anzaldúa 49)

Thus, divided from her darker aspect, Cihuacoatl, Tonantsi became the "good mother", the one associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Spanish further severed these two aspects,

solidifying the virgin-whore dichotomy by oversexualizing Cihuacoatl, associating her with the seductive La Llorona who in turn became associated with La Malinche, the much-maligned native woman who was enslaved by Hernán Cortés and forced to serve as translator, guide, and intermediary. Anzaldúa, Helena Maria Viramontes, Sandra Cisneros, and many other Chicana and Latinx artists have attempted to revise this simplified and misogynistic portrayal of La Llorona as the “bad mother” and recuperate her for feminist and other political purposes. As scholar Ana María Carbonell argues,

This binary opposition, representing women as either safely passive or dangerously active, undercuts the principle of duality embedded within La Llorona in the shape of Coatlicue, a principle that by its very definition not only allows for, but encourages female agency. Coatlicue encourages resistance by pitting the desire for survival against the act of destruction. (56)

Alma’s character can be understood to recuperate the monstrous qualities of feminine deities in order to underscore Indigenous women’s capacity for agency in the face of oppression. She is threatening but with just cause, and not clearly legible as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad.’

Conclusion

La Llorona is not the first film to interrogate the Guatemalan Civil War and the resulting violence disproportionately perpetrated on Indigenous communities—both *Nuestras Madres* (2018), directed by César Díaz, and the documentary *El Buen Cristiano* (2016), directed by Izabel Acevedo, deal explicitly or implicitly with the trial of Rios Montt, and have as a focal

point issues of memory and transitional justice³⁴. Yet *La Llorona* distinguishes itself for its use of Indigenous folklore in combination with its use of gothic horror genre elements—the film makes visible and felt the haunting traces of the Civil War. My argument is not that one film’s aesthetics are more effective than another’s in their ability to render historical violence intelligible, but that *La Llorona*’s use of haunting aesthetics in combination with its affecting sound design provide audiences with a different “grammar of listening” that invites us into the invisibilized world of the marginalized, to linger in the feelings of anger, outrage, and horror with which Indigenous communities have had to live for centuries. Additionally, the spectator preparing to watch a horror film arrives ready to feel, ready to be pierced and made vulnerable by what the screen exposes them to, differently than the audience for a drama or a documentary. The focus on motherhood, which might initially seem regressive, is radical in this context because of the state’s desire to erase Indigeneity from the national outlook, rendering it only part of a “primitive” past. Instead, the film draws upon the temporal flexibility provided by the horror genre in order to allow an Indigenous Mayan woman from the past to impact the present (as well as the future, represented by the child Sara, who learns from Alma) and situate her as the voice of the motherland, implying that the nation was birthed by, and will continue to generate, Indigenous Mayans.

While other Latin American fictional cinema about authoritarian regimes interrogates the past through narratives about victims or perpetrators remembering or piecing together events through photographs and artifacts (as does *Nuestras Madres*), through flashback sequences, or through experimental aesthetic modes that seek to create an unsettling or disorienting experience

³⁴ These directors, along with Sergio Ramírez, who directed *Distancia* (2019) and *1991* (2021), Camila Urrutía, director of *Polyora en el Corazón* (2019), and documentary filmmaker Ana Bustamante, are part of a growing canon of internationally recognized Guatemalan filmmakers that are drawing attention to a new Guatemalan cinema.

for the spectator (such as in the films of Lucrecia Martel or Albertina Carri) Bustamante's film gives us a visual representation of an embodiment of haunting/the haunted in the character of Alma, who is tied to a specific real historical event (Alma is ghostly, but she is also a corporeal, Indigenous woman and not only a specter). By making literal the monstrosity of past injustices, Bustamante gives the spectator a different kind of access to history that creates space for an alternative reality in which vengeance is permissible, where one can feel the depth of female anger, transmitted through a voice that resonates around the edges of the image. Bustamante's film operates a decolonizing aesthetic which weaves together historical elements and the fantastic or supernatural, and in so doing rewrites the relation between Indigeneity and monstrosity, situating the latter as a means to sense the past within the present, and pointing the way towards a future in which the lived experiences of Indigenous women cannot be ignored.

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V. The Touch of the Wild: Posthuman Feminist Horror and the Senses in *As Boas Maneiras*

...men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved...they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus* [Man is a wolf to man].

- Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings...The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

- Audre Lorde, "The Erotic as Power"

The texts cited above offer different perspectives on the struggle at the heart of most fantasy, science fiction, and horror genre films—namely, the question of whether humankind is fundamentally “good” or “evil,” a binary stubbornly persistent in popular culture, and one with far-reaching implications. The perpetual alignment of the animal, savage, and wild on the side of evil and against the rational, enlightened, and civilized “good” has gone hand-in-hand with the colonial domination, extractivism, and environmental degradation that have led to the planetary-scale catastrophes we today find ourselves battling. The widespread erroneous notion of the inherent aggression and “evil” of wolves, for example—whose behaviors were in fact imitated by early humans to the extent that we hunted cooperatively, lived in family bands, and communicated in complex ways³⁵—drove them to be freely hunted to extinction in the area of Yellowstone national park, leading to the devastation of hundreds of other plant and animal

³⁵ See Steven H. Fritts, Robert O. Stephenson, Robert D. Hayes, and Luigi Boitani *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*, edited by L. David Mech, and Luigi Boitani, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

species in a trophic cascade, a metonymic example of the larger phenomenon that has come to be known as the Anthropocene. Human attempts to “master” nature have been internal as well as external, as much of Michel Foucault’s work has examined. As Jack Halberstam points out, in *The Order of Things* Foucault makes the broad claim that in a postreligious world, “nature can no longer be good,” framing the animal as the “bearer of death,” and wildness as “an experience of finitude lived within... an untamed ontology” (Halberstam 12). Within the desire for order and hierarchy lies a desire to escape the instability caused by death, the threat of vulnerability to forces beyond human control. Embracing wildness, therefore, entails a form of denial of the human, or an expansion of it beyond the way it has been traditionally conceived. This is the primary focus of scholars of posthumanism, who are interested in probing the ways in which the idea of “the human” and its claims to universality have actually contributed to the marginalization of certain subjects.

Within a colonial and hetero-patriarchal framework, women are construed as closer to animality and thus always potentially threatening to order and rationality, and their transgressions of gender norms are understood to bring the social world to teeter dangerously on the edge of wildness. As Maria Lugones suggests, the binary understanding of gender is itself a product of coloniality, having been defined as exclusively the province of the bourgeois European heterosexual couple against the dehumanized, “animal” bodies of the colonized. The concept of gender was established as “one of the marks of the human” as distinguished from the raw, “non-socializable sexual difference” of racialized women (Lugones, *Gender & Universality* 33). The policing of women’s bodies and the framing of racialized women as inhuman and monstrous is being increasingly critiqued in fascinating ways by Latin American filmmakers, often utilizing speculative genre conventions (primarily horror and science fiction), as I have

argued. Scholars of posthumanism have observed that recent “posthuman” depictions of alien, monstrous, or cyborg-women in genre texts can be fruitful territory for critiquing an antiquated humanism that binds subjectivity to oppositional frameworks (male/female, human/nonhuman, nature/culture, body/mind).

Rosi Braidotti’s conception of “posthuman feminism” offers a useful approach to this new speculative cinema and its investments in, on the one hand, blurring the boundaries between these oppositions, and, on the other, building alliances between marginalized subjects (female, queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, disabled, etc.). For Braidotti, today’s posthuman feminism must meet the urgent demands of the political moment by “[encouraging] a different notion of political subjectivity as a heterogeneous assemblage of embodied and embedded humans” (6) in order to form a collective “we” that nevertheless acknowledges “different perspectives and lived realities” (9). This approach aims to de-link sexuality from gender in favor of more complex understandings of how sexuality is lived, contesting the fixity of understandings of sexual difference. A posthuman feminism “reflects seriously on the carnal powers of the flesh and elemental force of Eros, but also on its marginalization in the biopolitical management of posthuman bodies as reproductive and desiring machines” (179). In other words, love is a vital experience of the flesh that nevertheless is “transgressive and [moves] beneath and beyond fixed unitary identities and gender binaries” (179), across species and temporalities—it is wild and untamed.

Given that cinema, as a posthuman technology³⁶, creates an experience of ontological uncertainty, displacing viewers’ sense of reality and prompting sensorial reactions out of our

³⁶ As noted by Dijana Jelača, “Cinema is a tableau onto which we (still) project our fantasies and anxieties, but it is also an organic extension of our technologically infused realities that frequently blurs fact and fiction” (381).

control, how might certain films recruit the sensory intensities of genre conventions for a feminist posthumanist project? Analyzing the sense of touch that drives the narrative of the Brazilian film *As Boas Maneiras/Good Manners* (2017), a horror-fantasy-musical hybrid, this chapter will analyze how the film performs a rebellious posthumanist critique by posing complex questions about the nature of queer desire and empathy. The spectator is invited to feel empathy with the film's "monsters" through a sense of our own embodiment—against the classic horror film's harnessing of our fear that we are "forever linked to the crudeness of our earthbound bodies" as Vivian Sobchack observes (39), this film illuminates the transformative potential of monstrosity as it "erodes the majoritarian pull of the binary gender system" (Braidotti 220) and encourages empathetic relations beyond the human.

As Boas Maneiras (Good Manners), co-directed by Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutras, is an urban fairytale in two parts: an interracial queer romance and a werewolf coming-of-age story, and it bends the rules of genre by combining a sprinkling of suspense and gore with romance, musical numbers, and animation. Just as it gleefully combines and revises genres and aesthetics, the film also demonstrates the fluidity of bodies and subjectivities, as well as the central role of embodiment in perception. In the protagonist, Clara, a Black queer woman from the periphery of São Paulo who becomes the surrogate mother for a werewolf boy, one can locate the most radical possibilities of posthumanism, one which refuses many of the characteristics that have come to trouble scholars—fixed identity formations, universalism, disconnectedness, and anthropocentrism. Analyzing the emergence of "alien feminisms" in cinematic depictions of posthuman women, Dijana Jelača (building upon Braidotti's work) argues that "rather than rejecting them altogether, posthumanist epistemologies need to reengage notions such as "empowerment," "community building," and "bonding" (Braidotti 2013, 54) and the notions of

self and other, in ways that displace implicit Eurocentrism, ableism, whiteness, and anthropocentrism rather than reiterate their epistemological hold” (Jelača 399). This film, I argue, engages all these notions while emphasizing the sense of touch as a central component of communication, bonding, and love. In so doing, it invites the spectator into a posthuman feminist project in which the body’s responsiveness cues a sense of responsibility and ethics not predicated on the recognition of another’s humanity³⁷.

In *As Boas Maneiras*, Ana (Marjorie Estiano) is an expectant mother who hires Clara (Isabél Zuaa) to work for her as a housekeeper and eventual nanny. Ana is wealthy and white, and she lives in a bourgeois upper floor apartment in São Paulo. She initially does not want to hire Clara, who is Black, due to Clara’s poor references, but when Clara helps her overcome a moment of physical pain, Ana hires her on the spot. Clara moves in with Ana, and their tenuous relationship turns into something deeper as they discover a passion for one another, despite Clara’s growing concern for Ana’s somnambulism and strange behavior during full moons. Ana, who becomes disinherited by her family because she became pregnant out of wedlock, tells Clara that the father of her child is a mysterious man she met in the countryside, with whom she made love in a car, after which she fended off an attack by a strange beast. One night, during the summer festival of São João, the creature in Ana’s belly claws its way out in a bloody birth, killing Ana in the process. Clara, horrified, initially tries to abandon the creature but decides to adopt him instead. Clara raises the werewolf child, Joel, back in her neighborhood across the river, keeping him on a strict vegetarian diet in order to curb his wild appetites. Every full moon, she lovingly locks Joel up in the “quartinho” or little room, a secret concrete bunker equipped with metal chains, for his own protection as well as that of others. Although initially docile and

³⁷ Here I refer to the capital-H “Humanity” of Enlightenment humanism that became the basis for the colonial ordering.

dotting, after Clara's neighbor gives Joel some meat to eat, he becomes unpredictable and rebellious, recruiting his friend Mauricio to skip school and go to the city to find his father on the night of a full moon. The two boys get trapped in the mall, Joel transforms into a werewolf and kills his friend, then he returns home. After Joel locks his mother in the bunker and almost attacks his school friend Amalia, Clara escapes, shoots Joel in the leg and takes him back home, where she gently chains him and extracts the bullet from his leg. They await the wrath of the angry mob of neighbors, and in the end, mother and werewolf child take hands and face the uncertain future together. The film's depiction of queerness begins with the romantic relationship between Ana and Clara, then shifts to envision queerness as radical empathy, in the form of Clara's bond with the werewolf child Joel. The healing touch that Clara once applied to Ana becomes transferred to Joel, and her nontraditional mothering of the werewolf, initiated by an encounter with the untamable and monstrous, transgresses the notion of a fixed nature/culture paradigm.

Although the extensive use of interior spaces and close-ups in the film connects it to the Gothic horror tradition, and its gory, blood-spattering scenes are aligned with "body horror," the film frames women's bodies as both susceptible to pain and capable of curative power in equal measure. In Erin Harrington's influential work on "gynaehorror," defined as a "value-laden mode of aesthetic expression and cinematic representation that denigrates the female body and defines it foremost by its reproductive capacities in a manner that is negative and damaging" (9), Harrington signals the underlying misogyny of horror films that situate the female body as always-already monstrous and inferior to man, and female embodiment as *a priori* "failure and entrapment" (7). However, mindful of the ways in which articulating binaries can serve to reproduce and reify them, she reframes traditional approaches to feminist horror film criticism by

shifting her focus to how these films “unpick” the binaries that structure the normalized asymmetrical power relations between “the one (the norm, the centre, the reasoned, the mind, Man) and the Other (the abnormal, the periphery, the uncontained, the body, Woman)” (5). Harrington draws upon Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizomatic “becoming,” a process of continuous erasure and re-composition of the boundaries between self and other, as “an ideal way to consider bodily transformations and mutations in horror film, for it reframes ‘the body’ as an unstable category, not a fixed entity, and these shifts and metamorphoses as something potentially generative rather than negative and threatening” (6). *As Boas Maneiras* illustrates precisely this generative capacity in its approach to mutations of bodies and relationships, and at the same time it carves out new directions for gynaehorror that shift away from denigration of the female/feminine while queering the concept of motherhood. Surpassing a mere revision of the horror genre, this film maintains an underlying emphasis on the centrality of somatic relationality that simultaneously does not confine the feminine to *only* embodiment. Instead, touch becomes a kind of knowledge, and the body’s susceptibility to (wild and unruly) change, often catalyzed by skin-to-skin contact, becomes a foundation for radical empathy rather than a source of fear.

In what follows, I will develop my argument through close readings of key moments in which Clara’s touch catalyzes the film’s narrative. I will attempt to show that particularly within the context of the contemporary (post-2002) Brazilian cinematic landscape, the film performs a feminist posthumanist critique of monstrous hierarchies, offering instead an imaginative vision of an inclusive ethic of care, one which is not predicated on the imposition of static roles, and does not even require its object to be a clearly defined human or animal.

Caretaking and Black Motherhood

During the first scene, Ana interviews Clara for the position of housecleaner and eventual caretaker for her baby. Over the course of the interview, it is ascertained that Clara does not have the requisite qualifications—Ana reviews her resumé and notes that Clara never finished her nursing degree, lacks experience as a nanny, and that Clara’s only reference is her sour-faced landlady to whom she owes rent. Clara mentions that she took care of her grandmother until her death, for seven years (04:18), but this experience does not quite convince Ana of Clara’s skill beyond what is written on paper, and it becomes clear that Clara will not be hired (something to which Clara seems resigned). However, when Ana has a sudden pain that causes her to moan and hunch over, the viewer sees the first instance of Clara’s healing touch: Clara springs into action and lunges toward Ana, pushing her back in her chair, and then moves around to the back of her chair to place her hands on Ana’s hips, then her shoulders, then finally places them underneath her jaw (07:12-07:35). Ana breathes, relaxing as the pain abates, and then gazes up at Clara, stunned and amazed. She stares, coming to a decision, then simply asks, “can you cook?” and with that, Clara is hired.

This first scene establishes multiple important elements that will be reinforced throughout the narrative: first, Ana’s wealth, privilege and position of power and Clara’s relative poverty and precarity. The story that emerges from the interview is that Clara was in nursing school but had to quit to care for her ailing grandmother, who died in poverty, leaving Clara without resources. It also seems likely that Clara has suffered a series of job rejections since her grandmother’s death, given her seeming resignation to not being hired. The second important element is that Clara has skills that cannot be captured on paper; she has a deep knowledge of the body and the ability to heal and soothe. Her identity as a caretaker is underscored by her career

choice, her relationship to her grandmother, and her relationship to her landlady, Dona Amélia—when the latter complains over the phone that she cannot find her remote control, Clara explains that it is probably underneath the couch, where she “always drops it” (06:20), which indicates that she also provides some form of care for Dona Amélia. Caretaking is thus not merely a job for Clara, but a vocation. In this sense there is a clear line connecting this character to the stereotype of the *mãe preta* or “black mother” of Brazilian literature and film, which as Robert Stam notes “was celebrated in sentimental poetry as patient and self-sacrificing for the good of the whites in her care” in a manner similar to the Black “mammy” and Aunt Jemima characters depicted in U.S. culture (331). The *mãe preta* in Brazilian society was originally an enslaved wet nurse whose children were taken away from her and sold into slavery and who served as a nanny, raising and caring for her master’s white children (Sá 316). This trope is first reiterated, then playfully subverted through the depiction of the lesbian relationship and the scene of the white employer’s gory death, then through Clara’s growing self-confidence and agency. When one night Clara goes out to a bar, leaving the pregnant Ana at home, she is flirted with by another woman who asks her if Clara is “escaping her boss,” to which Clara calmly and assuredly responds “I don’t need to run away from anyone” (29:33). Although she does care for first her white employer and then the child of her white employer, Ana’s dependence on Clara, the former’s financial trouble, and their eventual romantic entanglement all serve to alter the typical dynamic. Clara’s hand literally guides the narrative, first by touching Ana, then by guiding her/their child. Ultimately, while Joel’s animal nature is not excised, his thirst for violence is quelled by Clara’s patient acceptance—she shoots him in the leg to prevent him from killing a young girl, but then she lovingly removes the bullet and regains his trust by singing to him and holding his hand.

The film's focus on female domestic labor and caregiving joins it to the growing body of Latin American films that examine domestic servants as figures that problematize and contest the hierarchical power structures within the family dynamics and new socioeconomic orders in Latin America, as explored by scholars such as Sofia Ruiz-Alfaro and Elizabeth Osbourne³⁸. Yet its fantasy and horror elements, as well its depiction of queer love, enable it to perform a very different critique than these other films. Its posthuman approach allows for a speculative reimagining of relations between human and non-human as well as across racial, gender, and class divisions. To understand this type of intervention within Brazil's national cinema, I turn to an examination of the film's title and how this notion of "good manners" links it to other recent films that examine contemporary employer-employee relationships in Brazilian households.

The title "Good Manners" connotes Sergio Buarque de Holanda's concept of the "cordial man," developed in his well-known 1936 historiographical book *Raizes do Brasil* (Roots of Brazil), in which he describes the Brazilian national character as one which does not limit itself to mere civility and good manners, but which strives for a sense of intimacy with others. According to Buarque de Holanda, the defining Brazilian virtues of "affability in relationships, hospitality, generosity" are "legitimate expressions of an extremely rich and overflowing emotional base" (117) that surpasses a formulaic politeness. As noted by Yuri Garcia, in the political and cultural sphere, this term came to represent a sense of blurred distinctions between private and public life by reinforcing the notion that Brazilians constitute one big family, which ultimately only benefits those already in power (2). Lúcia Sá agrees with Garcia and goes on to suggest that good manners or "cordiality," in the context of the relationship between upper-class employers and their domestic workers, serve to reinforce social hierarchies within the home. For

³⁸ These include recent Brazilian films such as *Aquarius* (Mendonça Filho, 2016), *Que Horas Ela Volta?* (*The Second Mother*; Muylaert 2015), *Casa Grande* (Barbosa 2015) and *Domésticas* (*Mmaids*, Meirelles and Olival, 2001).

Sá, Ana Muylaert's film *Que Horas Ela Volta?* (*The Second Mother*) (2015) illuminates the "other side of the coin of 'cordiality': cordiality can only exist as long as domestic servants know their place; conversely, the only way we can accept the lingering of servitude in our intimate life is by making it look like friendly, informal relationships" (325). In *Que Horas Ela Volta?*, an incisive and subtle film that critiques the manipulation of supposed intimacy within domestic servitude in São Paulo, the matriarch tells the protagonist Val, her servant, that she is "almost part of the family" ("praticamente da família"), and alternates between superficially affectionate treatment of Val and firm, authoritative orders. By contrast, Ana's treatment of Clara in *As Boas Maneiras* dispenses with false politeness altogether, and Ana's sense of propriety diminishes as the baby inside of her grows, an uncanny pregnancy that seems to drive her to indulge her appetites (such as consuming raw meat and blood) and ultimately to initiate a sexual relationship with Clara.

The film thus plays with stereotypical depictions of upper-class/lower-class, employer/domestic servant relationships, first taking up these dichotomies, then surpassing them. It ultimately suggests that true "good manners," rather than a superficial attitude taken up merely to assert hierarchical positions, are in fact selfless acts (exemplified by Clara) based upon empathy and a recognition of the mutual interdependence of beings both human and non-human. Clara is the most marginalized character in terms of race, class, and sexuality, yet she is able to assert the most agency over threatening supernatural violence, not by responding with equal violence but by practicing radical empathy. The film thus deftly demonstrates both the societal elements that oppress Black women and prevent them from achieving socioeconomic mobility, and an image of complex Black subjectivity that escapes from domestic servitude to become self-sufficient. Moreover, the alternative familial structure comprised of a queer Black woman

and a werewolf boy introduces a critique of the human/nonhuman binary into the matrix of hierarchical relations targeted by films such as *Que Horas Ela Volta?*

Clara's hands, though they are put to work in service of her employer, who asks her to help with cooking and housework in preparation for the baby's birth, also exert influence early on over Ana and her unborn child. Clara increasingly takes on the role of Ana's partner in childrearing, reinforced by many cut-ins of Clara's hands joined with Ana's, including at her doctor's office appointments (see Fig. 4). In a key moment, Clara saves the life of Ana's werewolf baby: after the baby bursts violently out of Ana's stomach, Clara witnesses Ana's last breaths and bestows a final kiss, then her attention is startled by a noise. She grabs a gun from Ana's bedside table, then turns to find the strange baby crawling across the floor, gasping. Clara sees it struggling to breathe with the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck, then slowly lowers the gun and kneels to unwrap the cord. In a sequence of shot-reverse-shot medium close-ups, we see the bloodied, whimpering, hairy child from Clara's perspective: he returns her/our gaze, at once pitiful and hideous (see Fig. 5).

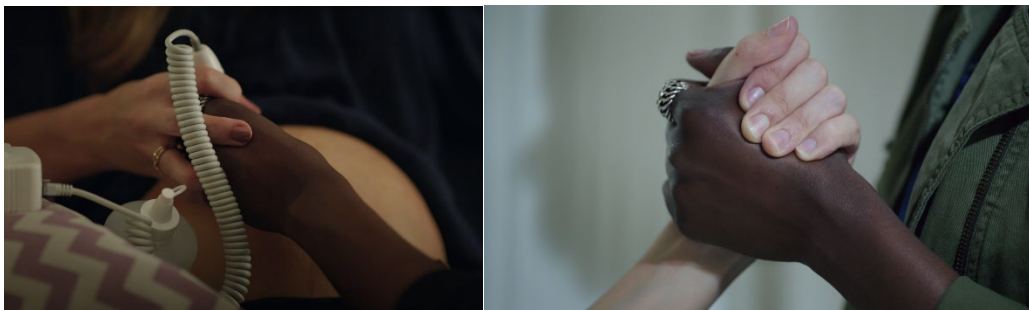


Figure 4. Clara and Ana listen to the baby's heartbeat together, before Clara gives Ana a book of baby names to help her decide. Ana later squeezes Clara's hand while looking at an ultrasound.



Figure 5. Clara saves the life of the newborn werewolf.

In this moment, Clara's "animalized" humanity as a Black woman is refracted in the werewolf baby. As Zakiyyah Jackson argues,

Binaristic frameworks such as "humanization versus dehumanization" and "human versus animal" are insufficient to understand a biopolitical regime that develops technologies of humanization in order to refigure blackness as abject human animality and extends human recognition in an effort to demean blackness as "the animal within the human" form. (20)

Clara then wraps Joel in a blanket and takes him to the river to abandon him but decides to take him home instead; despite his threatening potential, Clara chooses to adopt and care for the monster. Back in her home, she soothes the baby by offering him her breast to suckle, which he also bites and draws blood from. This first half of the film thus suggests the insufficiency of inclusion within the category of "the human" to either account for other ways of being (the werewolf) *or* to erase antiblackness and the demeaning of Black women (Clara's race is a contributing factor to her lack of socioeconomic advancement up until this point in the film, as I have noted). Clara's embrace of animality is not therefore a capitulation to the racial hierarchy, but a resistance to "assimilation into the very definition of humanity that produces racial hierarchy" (Jackson 3). Clara's queer Black mothering of the werewolf becomes an example of

“dissident ontological and materialist thinking” (Jackson 4) that refuses a normative, idealized humanity altogether and imagines a new way of being in relation.

Horror and the Queer Sensorium in Brazilian Cinema

In horror films, the human body’s instability and capacity for transformation is often underscored precisely through hyper-sensory and affecting imagery and soundscapes, which generates something of a paradox: the (spectator) body’s embedded sensory capacities become the source for understanding the screened body’s fundamental vulnerability to change. Through its ability to stimulate the sensorium, horror cinema becomes one site where posthuman critique can be performed through affecting explorations of social norms. As Angela Ndalianis reminds us, the sensorium includes both the senses and cognition: we reflect cognitively on what we see on screen while simultaneously being touched or moved by it (11). In her analysis of new horror media in the United States, Ndalianis indicates that before the release of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), this genre was invested in providing a heightened sensory experience “in order to test the borders that demarcate society, order, and normality from the anti-social, chaotic and abnormal” and yet “the social status quo was reinstated in the end” (17). By contrast, horror films from the 1960s on, or what she terms “New Horror,” has heightened its “focus on the body...[giving] voice to the theme of society in decay through intense sensorial and carnal engagement. New Horror speaks to a sensorium that invests in the sensory intelligence of its spectator” (17) and more often leaves its viewers in a state of uncertainty at the end of the film, carrying into the real world a body-mind shaken with powerful messages about the state of humanity. This increase in intensity has not been accompanied by a decrease in political awareness, rather it is the

opposite—as Ndaljianis argues, “our cognitive engagement with the ideological issues raised by horror film...rely on our sensory responses to the horror” (20).

Although I would not categorize *As Boas Maneiras* as New Horror due to its genre hybridity, it does similarly invite heightened sensory responses from its viewers. Yet rather than focus on humanity’s decay, it aims for its spectators to feel the coexistence of love and pain through a combination of horror and queer aesthetics. Scholars of queer cinema point to the importance of its sensorial and corporeal dimensions, often drawing on Sara Ahmed’s notion of “queer phenomenology” to explore the way in which sexual orientations toward others are shaped by our bodily tendencies. A queerly oriented cinema is invested in exploring “how we extend through our bodies into the world” (Ahmed 68), and unsettling conventional notions of embodied existence. At the same time, it invites viewers to inhabit space differently by framing unconventional perspectives, or by creating “affective scenarios” imbued with “variously queer resonances” (Lindner 123). *As Boas Maneiras* asks viewers to walk the line between pleasure and pain with Clara throughout, such as in her first sexual encounter with Ana in which Ana passionately kisses Clara but then bites her. In this scene, Clara wakes at night to find Ana raiding the fridge, and cautiously approaches her. When Ana turns to her, her behavior is animalistic—she pauses to gaze at Clara mutely, then suddenly leans in to sniff her, grabbing her arm. Ana inhales Clara’s scent deeply, then kisses her aggressively, as if she is attempting to devour her, and eventually she bites Clara’s lip and Clara pulls away, gasping in pain. It is unclear whether Ana is simply consumed by her passion for Clara or possessed by a supernatural force—the film appears to suggest that both are true, given that later Ana does initiate a sexual encounter with Clara when not under this mysterious influence. The intertwining of affective

registers, tenderness and romance combined with sudden aggression, prods the viewer into a queer state of vulnerability, unease, and desire for sensuous engagement all at once.

Recent queer speculative production tends to turn towards the unruly, monstrous, or deviant as a source of attraction rather than trepidation. Braidotti observes that within contemporary science fiction, horror, and hybrid speculative genre forms “monstrosity expresses less anxiety about the status of the human and rather a distinct sense of relief at the collapse of the normative frameworks that used to define it” (220). These visions, often generated by artists who identify as queer, can be explicitly political and concerned with building alliances and solidarities, particularly across class and racial lines. *As Boas Maneiras*, which is co-directed by two queer filmmakers, joins this growing canon, as a text that explores what it means to love a monster and positions this love as central to its critique of gendered and racialized social norms. The film’s intertwining of horror, fantasy and queer aesthetics support a women-centered narrative, already an example of politically dissident thinking, particularly in the context of Brazil’s turn towards conservatism beginning around 2015 that contributed to the ousting of Dilma Rousseff and later the election of Jair Bolsonaro. As Stephanie Dennison observes, the climate under President Bolsonaro in Brazil (and to a large extent still continuing today under President Lula da Silva) was one characterized by “on the one hand, a rise in intolerance and open acts of violence and sexism as endorsed by representatives of far-right politics, and on the other of women-centered movements that challenge[d] this intolerance” (71).

Within the last decade, Latin American cinema has often wielded horror for sociopolitical critique with films such as *La Llorona* (Bustamante, 2019), *Huesera: The Bone Woman* (Cervera, 2023), and *La Region Salvaje (The Untamed)*, (Escalante, 2016), which all examine gender and/or racial politics in relation to class issues. This newer body of films all explore the

possibilities of “body horror” in transmitting political messages more forcefully than previous generations of horror film. Brazilian film scholar Laura Cánepa identifies a Brazilian horror film revival taking place from the mid-2000s onwards, right after the release of *Embodiment of Evil* (*Encarnação do demônio*, 2008), directed by José Mojica Marins, a key figure in Brazilian horror film, and she highlights the importance of this genre for addressing legacies of colonial violence:

It’s possible to suggest that these films deal with yet unresolved matters caused by tensions that society experiences in Brazil. In a way, personal, social, and work relations in the country are not far removed from backward notions rooted in slavery and are just beginning to be dealt with through the horror perspective – understood as the representation of our feelings in the face of the threat of a deadly explosion of violence. Our origins as a society have been dealt with by Brazilian cinema in different ways throughout its history (comedic, use of *Carnaval*, melodramatic, revolutionary, anarchistic, crime film, etc.), but new generations have possibly found a new language – horror – to regard them. (Cánepa, 2016, qtd. in Barrenha)

This language of horror in Brazil does not always adhere strictly to classic horror conventions—instead, Cánepa identifies dominant hybrid categories that have emerged, which include the horror-parody exemplified by Ivan Cardoso’s work, the more explicit or shocking combinations of horror with sexploitation (such as in Mojica’s work), and the newer wave of independent horror now in process, which “has been able to adapt to the festival circuits, engaging with the global film market, creating perhaps the first tendency in Brazilian horror that has potential to circulate outside the country” (Horrofilmico 113, my translation) appealing to both national and international audiences. As an internationally co-produced horror-fairytale-musical hybrid, *As*

Boas Maneiras draws upon the horror tradition while not being limited by it, deftly thwarting audience expectations by crafting a sensorially-laden yet tender story that combines terror with pleasure, and fantasy with social realism.

The alliance between Clara and Ana develops in part because Ana has been stripped of her class position and denied acceptance by the hetero-patriarchal order, in which she would be required to raise her child within a heterosexual marriage, rather than on her own. Ana recounts how when she became pregnant through a man who was not her fiancé, her father and family cut ties with her, and her fiancé denounced her publicly (by posting on the internet), thereby making her a social pariah. When she tells this tale to Clara, Clara replies “You don’t have to mind what people think or say. Fuck them” (24:00), seeming to speak to herself as much as to Ana.

Alongside their physical attraction, the implicit realization of their oppression through structural misogyny and societal norms cements their emotional connection. Both these queer and unruly mothers are also transformed into monstrous bodies that are torn and bloodied as they give life to alternative romantic and familial relations. This underscoring of the female body’s mutability, while it performs a shocking spectacle for the film audience, is also a challenge to a social order that insists on boundaries and knowability. Within the film, queer love is not forced to replicate the heteronormative familial structure because of the focus on first Ana’s, then Clara’s agency as an independent single mother, rather than on the two-parent nuclear family. As Oliveira-Monte observes, in the film’s second half, Clara and Joel form an “uncanny family” that subverts dominant discourse about normative family structures (42). She notes that

during the 2018 presidential election campaign, Jair Bolsonaro’s vice-presidential candidate, General Hamilton Mourão, characterized families without fathers as

dysfunctional and true “factories of misfits,” attracting criticism from Brazilian feminist leaders. (42)

Against a hetero-patriarchal order that would aim to exorcize the werewolf (and by implication, homosexuality, queerness, and anything else cast as “dysfunctional” under a colonial matrix) from society and impose a dysfunctional label on single-family households, this uncanny family constructs a “[micro-space] of resistance within mainstream society...centered on female affect and matriarchal values” (Oliveira-Monte 47). This focus on female affect and, I argue, the sense of touch, is fundamentally anti-colonial because the colonial-modern framework not only devalues female affect, de-linking it from masculinist rationalism, but reduces (particularly Afro-descendent) women to only their embodiment. However, rather than deny the materiality of the body in order to claim validity under the colonizer’s episteme, here the body is firmly asserted as a valuable site of knowledge production against colonial and heteronormative logics.

Clara’s pragmatism, developed through her experience living on the margins, proves very beneficial when she becomes Joel’s primary caregiver. After Ana and Clara have initiated their sexual relationship, during a cozy nighttime fireplace scene, the couple is prying diamonds off Ana’s fancy cowboy boots in order to sell to pay off bills, and Ana expresses skepticism that there will be enough money left over to pay for the baby, to which Clara responds “you just don’t know how to be thrifty” (51:10), insinuating that Clara’s experience has taught her how to make do with very little. After Ana’s death, during the timelapse shots that initiate the second half of the narrative, we see the drab, worn façade of Clara’s house with a few plants in front transform into a vibrant, freshly painted house with an explosion of potted plants and greenery, now with a clothesline on which a child’s clothing sways (1:08:21—1:08:34). Joel has aged and

is now about seven years old (he appears in werewolf form only during the full moon, and otherwise looks like a human child), and Clara now has longer hair, wears colorful, patterned clothing and smiles more often. She visits the house of a patient to whom she gives an injection, and we learn that she is now a nurse and works in a pharmacy, where she is soon shown teaching an employee how to take blood pressure (1:13:00). With the help of Ana's diamonds, Clara has been able to finish her degree and achieved self-actualization as Joel's mother and as an accredited medical worker in her community. Despite having helped to bring a werewolf into the world, an ostensibly terrible creature and a source of violence, Clara has achieved a previously inaccessible form of social mobility, largely by her own hand (both figuratively and literally), as well as a visible sense of satisfaction and well-being.

Werewolves and Unruly Others

The werewolf is an unruly creature that defies categorization as either human or animal, and this film's central werewolf figure aligns it with other speculative genre films that are interested in showing an intimacy with mutable, boundary-destroying bodies. Valeria Vallegas Lindvall examines Lillah Halla's short film *Menarca* (2020) about a strange creature who washes ashore in a small Brazilian fishing community and develops an affinity with a young girl, and following Braidotti's posthuman feminist approach, contends that the secondary characters' violent rejection of the indeterminate creature

reminds us of the terror of practical exclusion and violence enacted on the body that proves unruly towards classification under colonial parameters of "Humanity," precipitating the alienation of "women and LGBTQ+ people (sexualized others), Black and Indigenous people (racialized others) and the animals, plants and earth entities

(naturalized others)” to further the notion that “‘Man’ is One and fully entitled” (Braidotti 2021, 54). (175)

Diverging from the simplistic binarism of classic works of horror, fantasy, and folklore in which good and evil are opposed, films such as *As Boas Maneiras* and *Menarca* refuse easy dichotomies and embrace the unruly, often centering images of transgressive women and queer desire. Jack Halberstam proposes a definition of wildness as “an epistemology, a terrain of alternative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity and as a merging of anticolonial, anticapitalist, and radical queer interests” (x), which perhaps illuminates why the representation of alternative corporealities on screen has become so generative for queer film artists.

Although the actual werewolf in *As Boas Maneiras* is a young boy, in the first half it is Ana who undergoes supernatural transformations every full moon during her pregnancy, and who from the beginning is aligned with the natural world and a non-normative “animal” nature. She is a woman who gives in to her “deviant” sexual desires and is estranged from her wealthy family as a result. Her home is filled with animal imagery, from a mounted bull’s head on the wall, to her fake fur and animal print clothing, to the various animal figurines in her baby’s bedroom (a deer, a dove, and a horse). Showing Clara this room and the music box with a plastic horse that turns in time with the music, Ana explains that the music box is a family heirloom, passed down, she says, from her grandfather to her father, and then to her. She is the heir to a masculine legacy, as is also affirmed by the doormat Clara sees before entering the home that reads in Latin “Olim Pulchra Filia Regia” or “There Once Was the Daughter of a King.” Additionally, her sexuality defies the homosexual-heterosexual binary: when she tells Clara the tale of how she became pregnant, she speaks of a one-night encounter with a man, followed by

an attack from a beast, whom she shoots in self-defense but does not kill (which parallels Clara's shooting of Joel in the leg at the film's close). Her romantic relationship with Clara is initiated when she is under the spell of the full moon, indicated by a change in her eye color from dark brown to gold, casting into uncertainty her true feelings—she may be bisexual or she may not be, sexuality is never explicitly discussed. The inclusion of the supernatural element into the narrative thus serves to disorient traditional notions of gender and sexuality, such that the werewolf itself becomes less of a focal point than the depiction of alternative sexual and familial bonds.

While initially Ana's feelings toward Clara are uncertain, they are confirmed during the lovemaking scene that begins around minute 37. When Ana cries out in the middle of the night because of a nightmare in which she is digging an interminable hole to bury her teeth, Clara comes to her bedroom and begins to comfort her, gently stroking her arms. Ana slowly turns to face Clara and kisses her passionately, and for a lengthy amount of time (about a minute). A bit later in the sequence, the camera closely follows Clara as she kisses Ana's large, pregnant belly, planting kisses that continue southwards toward the space between Ana's legs. We are also shown Ana pleasuring Clara from behind, and a close-up of the two women's faces displaying their enjoyment, but no nipples or genitalia are explicitly shown. These details matter because they are challenges to the male gaze, in which the camera will typically objectify the woman's body in a long shot, combined with a focus on her sexual organs in close-up (in soft and hardcore pornography), and if there is a man present his body operates as an authorial force driving the woman's objectification, encouraging a heterosexual male voyeurism. By contrast, this sex scene disperses control equally between the two women, enacting a "collaborative gaze" that does not

aim for domination of one by the other³⁹. Furthermore, the camera's focus on the women's faces and close-ups of skin-to-skin contact emphasizes intimate touch rather than visual spectacle as the source of pleasure (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. The lovemaking sequence.

The representation of a queer female sexual relationship on screen, especially one featuring an Afro-Brazilian, is still very radical in Brazilian cinema. Against a national backdrop of historical violence against and intolerance of the LGBTQ community, one manifestation of which was the purposeful repression of non-heteronormative sexual relations in cinema during the dictatorship (1964-1984), Brazilian films featuring LGBTQ protagonists have been scarce until quite recently. When homosexual desire has been depicted, it is often tragic and ill-fated due to societal intolerance, such as in *O beijo no asfalto* (*The Kiss*, 1981) or *Amor maldito* (*Cursed Love*, 1984). Several 21st-century films are changing this trend, however, including another of Ana Muylaert's entitled *Mãe só há uma* (*Don't Call Me Son*, 2016), which tells the story of a teenage boy who is brought to live with his biological family after discovering that he was stolen as a child, and explores the tensions between his fluid gender expression as it comes into conflict with his family and society. *Praia do Futuro* (*Future Beach*, Ainouz, 2014) and *Hoje eu quero voltar sozinho* (*The Way He Looks*, Ribeiro 2014), two recent films that achieved a wider viewership than most arthouse or festival films (the former featuring a well-known actor

³⁹ I have borrowed this term from Susie Hedley and T. R. Merchant-Knudsen in their review of *Portrait of Lady on Fire* (Sciamma, 2019), "Painting a Collaborative Gaze: Tactility and the Myth in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*." *Film International* (Göteborg, Sweden), vol. 19, no. 2, 2021, pp. 194–201, https://doi.org/10.1386/fint_00102_4.

and the latter being Brazil's entry for Best Foreign Film at the U.S. Academy Awards), center around romantic homosexual relationships between men and were critically well received. Today there are many more films being produced and exhibited that deal with these themes, as well as an LGBTQ film and arts festival (Festival Mix Brasil) that benefits from government support, though they are not always well received by the Brazilian public (Dennison 83). Among these films, those that feature a romance between two women are still rare, marking another way in which *As Boas Maneiras* breaks new ground.

Perhaps easier to exhibit in a society still mired in homophobia and sexism, horror films can provide opportunities for explorations of sexuality and other themes while using genre as both a vessel and a kind of cloaking device. Many recent horror films have been directed and produced by women, as observed by Natalia Christofolletti Barrenha, who analyzes the trope of hunger in these films and describes their female protagonists as “tired of being constrained, marginalized and annihilated” and “[seeking] to satisfy an immemorial appetite” (Christofolletti Barrenha). Since collaborating as students at the same film school, Juliana Rojas and Marco Dutra have created a significant body of work, most of which engages to some extent with horror's cinematic codes. Similar themes can be traced across all four of their films, most notably explorations of class hierarchies, empathy with monstrous or supernatural bodies, and a fascination with the maternal reproductive body. Theirs is an oblique engagement with horror conventions that does not center fear of the unknown, rather their films normalize the un/supernatural body and use it to draw attention to the ways in which women in society are negatively framed as monstrous but are simultaneously capable of deep knowing and connection to their surroundings (particularly to the natural world).

In their short film *Um Ramo (A Stem)*, Juliana Rojas & Marco Dutra, (2007), for example, a woman named Clarisse discovers plant stems and leaves growing out of her body, which she painfully tweezes and scrapes off with a razorblade. Her male doctors and her husband are mystified by her condition, making her suffering invisible. Her intuitive relationship with other animals (a bird who flies into her apartment, the fish in her fishtank) seems to suggest that she has a certain affinity with them, a connection that must be somehow repressed or concealed. In the last scene the full extent of her pain is revealed as she unwraps her bandages while crying, the camera showing intimately gruesome close-ups of her scraped and bleeding skin, but she is interrupted by her maid who knocks to ask about something banal, to which she responds calmly and pragmatically despite her agony. Left alone again, Clarisse stares accusingly at the camera before standing up slowly in the shower, the camera pulling back to reveal the full scope of her back and legs, patches of bleeding flesh alongside vivid green vines twisting underneath and across her skin. The name Clara shares a root with Clarisse, but here brightness and clarity give way to a sense of transparency—Clarisse is invisible to those around her, and she suffers incredible pain in trying to suppress or efface the parts of her body that defy rationalization, that would make her too visible in perhaps an undesirable way (a way that might brand her as a freak or a monster). In both films, the element of “wildness” emerges as something that disturbs a patriarchal sense of order and is catalyzed in some way by skin contact. Instead of a barrier between bodies or between the natural world and the human world, a woman’s skin becomes a wondrous, strange, and mutable site for contact with the unknowable.

As viewers, we are horrified and revulsed by the sight of skin pierced or scraped, but at the same time we feel strangely drawn to the helpless werewolf baby biting Clara’s proffered breast and fascinated by the bright green vines snaking down Clarisse’s legs. We are invited to

be moved in ways we cannot fully account for or rationalize. Yet, these films do not simply reiterate colonial notions of the female body as irrational and therefore in need of taming, but rather their focus on non-normative bodies illuminates (or clarifies) how *all bodies* are porous, tending towards transformation, and at times monstrosity. They point to the futility of hetero-patriarchal and colonial norms for reckoning with the unknown. I consider monstrosity in this sense to operate along similar lines to the “wildness” that Halberstam theorizes, which is:

not simply the opposite of order, nor the intensification of the natural. Nor is wildness a conventionally defined political project oriented toward disturbance; wildness is the absence of order, the entropic force of a chaos that constantly spins away from biopolitical attempts to manage life and bodies and desires...Wildness...disorders desire and desires disorder. (7)

For Halberstam, wildness is not some idyllic pre-modern state that structures an opposition to “civilization,” but instead “a form of disorder that will not submit to rule, a mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology, and a fantasy of life beyond the human” (8) where “the human” is understood as a normative colonial structure. While my focus here is on the bodies of cisgendered women, and I consider how these films focus on women’s bodies as “in touch” with wildness, this is not to suggest that only women have this capacity to transform, this porosity. Instead, what I argue is that women’s embodiment in these films allows us to understand the impoverishment of colonial binarism in its aim to contain any and all bodies, of any gender or sexuality. These visions of women who encounter a “fantasy of life beyond the human” prod the viewer into thinking differently about the assumed universal system of ordering the human and the non-human.

Monstrous Healing, Care, and Love

On a night of a full moon, after Ana and Clara have had their first sexual encounter, Ana awakens in the middle of the night and sleepwalks out into the street and through a park, followed by a frightened Clara, in a slow and dreamlike sequence set to harp music. Ana finds a white cat and picks it up, then breaks its neck and begins to devour it as Clara looks on in horror. The next day Ana seems energized, and we watch Clara's face display a dawning comprehension that Ana's need for blood and fresh meat is beyond the scope of a mere craving brought on by pregnancy hormones (43:30). But instead of running away from what is clearly a supernatural phenomenon, Clara becomes more resolved to help Ana, and she decides to supplement Ana's vegetarian lunch with some blood from her own body—she slices her hand open over a bowl of spaghetti, letting her drops of bright-red blood mingle with the tomato sauce (44:10-44:28). The camera lingers on Clara's blood in a long close-up (about eleven seconds), emphasizing Clara's sacrifice and commitment to nourishing Ana and her unborn child (Fig. 7). During the previous full moon, Ana had attacked Clara during a sleepwalking episode, which began with a passionate kiss and ended when Ana clawed Clara's neck and bit her lip, causing her to bleed. Though hurt, Clara did not rebuke Ana, thereby establishing her loyal and giving nature and willingness to undergo physical pain for Ana's sake. The spaghetti preparation is an important turning-point because it solidifies Clara's unquestioning acceptance of Ana's condition and her capacious, self-sacrificing love. It is also an instance of linking body-horror with love and compassion, in defiance of gynae-horror's requirement that female bodies be a source of fear and revilement. Clara overcomes her fear and refuses to become a victim of Ana's monstrosity, instead choosing to love and accept her, which is another reversal from classic horror films in which "the terror of the female victim shares the spectacle along with the monster" (Williams 5). Additionally, it

marks the transformation from Clara's role as housekeeper to partner and co-parent given Ana's unwitting consumption of Clara's bodily substance, a form of metaphorical "fertilization" of the unborn baby that cements the bond between the three characters. The piercing, slicing, and blood-smearing of Clara's skin becomes a focal point of the film, but so do images of Clara's hands as a source of healing, calming, and bonding.



Fig. 7. Clara bleeds onto a bowl of noodles.

As a structuring figure in a narrative that centers on a queer romance that leads to a queer familial relationship, the werewolf functions as a symbol for both what is threatening and oppressive in Brazilian society and the marginalization that oppression creates. It is simultaneously an emblem of the violence that creeps in through the cracks between the fragments of "civilization" and a way to conceptualize a way out, by embracing the unknown and displacing the primacy of the Human. The werewolf, like other monsters, symbolizes what is unruly and a threat to societal order; traditionally, it represents the humanist struggle between the 'primitive' and the civilized, the passionate body and the rational mind, and as such is imbued with notions relating to the developing discourses of aberrant gender and sexuality in 16th and 17th century Europe. Although werewolves and similar figures date back to antiquity, the phenomenon of lycanthropy as a subset of the practice of witchcraft become a major concern for European demonologists during the sixteenth century, and werewolves were understood to be

(male or female) witches who changed their shape in order to carry out anonymous acts of savagery.⁴⁰ Silvia Federici describes the precipitous rise of witch-hunting between 1580 and 1630, during which more than 80% of those tried and executed for being witches were women, and she notes in particular that “the charges of sexual perversion and infanticide had a central role [in this persecution], being accompanied by the virtual demonization of contraceptive practices” (197). Examining the links between witch-hunting, capitalism, and colonialism, Federici observes that as the development of capitalist economies solidified the sexual division of labor, the female body was “treated as a natural breeding machine” in the service of creating workers (101). Women, often midwives or ‘wisewomen,’ commonly faced accusations of killing children and preventing conception. Thus, accusations of witchcraft, demon-worship, and shapeshifting emerged as discourses aimed at control over women’s bodies.

Clara’s identity as a healer connects her with this global history of women who have drawn on traditional knowledge for healing and been persecuted for those practices. She is a queer, Black woman who practices healing arts and raises a werewolf child (to whom she metaphorically ‘gives life’ by unwrapping the umbilical cord from his neck after he is born, like a midwife might do), all of which are direct rebuttals to the system, developed in the 16th century and perpetuated in the present, that aims to destroy the social power of women and reduce them to less-than-human, laboring machine-bodies in order to justify their subjugation. This legacy remains present in Brazil and other parts of Latin America (as well as the U.S.), especially given

⁴⁰ H. Sidky points to the connection between witchcraft and lycanthropy (a phenomenon that peaked in Europe between the years of 1591 and 1686), noting that “Demonologists maintained that werewolves were actually witches who, through magical procedures and diabolical pacts, changed themselves into wolves and, while in the form of these ravenous and ferocious beasts...committed unspeakable atrocities, killing men, women, children, and livestock. Witches transformed themselves, or shifted shape, into wolves, demonographers argued, because of their innate greed, cruelty, lust for human flesh, thirst for human blood, and a desire to execute their heinous works without being identified” (215).

the politics of domestic labor as discussed above, but it is also visible through draconian abortion laws (as of this writing abortion is not only illegal in Brazil except in very limited circumstances, but a recent legislative proposal aims to equate abortion with homicide, and women who terminate pregnancies after 22 weeks could be jailed for up to 20 years).⁴¹

In the Americas, the methods utilized in Europe for the dehumanization of women (as well as other demonized groups such as the Jews and Moorish people of Spain) were easily transferred for use in the domination of first Indigenous, then Black bodies, inaugurating what Sylvia Wynter has termed the “coloniality of being”. As Wynter has demonstrated,

...it was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes), that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness—to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other, to this first degodded (if still hybridly religio- secular) “descriptive statement” of the human in history, as the descriptive statement that would be foundational to modernity. (266)

Colonial ideas of wildness, unruliness, and monstrosity thus become associated with a distinctly racialized and gendered conception of the human body as separate from the rational (Western, masculine, white) mind, which is to say that to speak about “the body” already acquires a taste of Otherness. While completely uprooting the body out of this history and this present, these sediments of labor, exploitation, sexism and racism, is impossible, it might be possible to reroute the currents of discourse that flow around and through it. Under these conditions, queer artists can help to chart paths that upend stale, centuries-old discourses of Otherness and reroute us towards rebellious and generative epistemologies of materialist monstrosity. Clara’s bodily

⁴¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyxx17zeydyo>

knowledge draws her into a closer connection with the un/supernatural, a connection that embraces the wild and the irrational, a gesture that prioritizes empathy over rationality (but does not completely disregard rationality, given Clara's scientific knowledge and pragmatism). In this way her name (meaning light, clear, or white) is an ironic commentary on her race but also a reference to how she embodies the joining of "good" and "evil", the known and the unknown. We might understand her as illuminating a new, perhaps disturbing, pathway to alternative modes of human relationality in which the boundaries of subjecthood are indeterminate and mutable, and fixity within a colonial framework is not a requirement for love and care.

Beyond the gender politics represented within the film, how does the film address its viewers' bodies, incorporating us within its queer, monstrous space of care? Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, and other film phenomenologists posit a "double and simultaneous appropriation of a position of sympathy vis-à-vis the Other, in which the self-awareness of one's own embodiment is the radically irreducible condition of empathy in the Other or another situation" (Elsaesser and Hagener 129). In other words, when I watch a film, the fact of my own embodiment becomes the condition under which I can make sense of the representation of another's experience on screen and develop a sense of responsibility to that Other. I argue that this film, like the other speculative films I discuss, recruits the sensory intensities embedded in genre forms (in this case, horror) in order to encourage new forms of political engagement for its spectators that prioritize embodied knowledge, a form of "dissident thinking" that emerges from a recognition of shared embodied being and refuses the opposition of self and Other. This is, in essence, a posthuman phenomenology of cinema. Through the combination of speculative aesthetics with sociopolitical critique—the use of the horror "body genre" to tell two queer (romantic and familial) love stories—the film creates opportunities for viewers to feel differently

about notions of care and love, concepts that are reimagined as more expansive, able to contain both queer love and queer mothering, and not reliant on the notion of the human. The film asks us not only to care for the monstrous werewolf-boy, but also to empathize with the empathizer (Clara) as one whose love knows no bounds. As spectators who are ourselves embodied, sensing and sensible subjects, the images of Clara's hands impress upon us physiologically, emotionally, and cognitively the notion of care as intrinsically intertwined with pain.

Despite the possibilities of pain and violence, ever present for a precarious, racialized, and gendered subject, Clara's touch is not aggressive or forceful (except in one pivotal instance), rather it is agentic precisely through its gentleness. Early in the second half of the film, after Clara lovingly handcuffs her adopted son Joel to the wall of his secret chamber on a night of the full moon in preparation for his werewolf transformation, there is a dream sequence in which Ana (now dead) appears. Similar to an earlier sequence in which the pregnant Ana, sleepwalking under the influence of the moon, sniffed Clara's neck and armpits before kissing her, now the situation is reversed—in the dream, Clara sniffs Ana, and seems about to kiss her, but looks down at her own hand, which is covered in blood. The close-up of Clara's bloody hand is immediately followed by a close-up of Clara's and Joel's (now hairy) hands as she clips his fingernails while he is in the bath the following morning (1:20:06 – 1:20:20) (See Fig. 8). This choice of editing signals the coexistence of pain and love in Clara's relationship with first Ana, then her son, but at the same time it illustrates the complex entanglement of desire, care, and violence between bodies. A bloodied hand is placed tenderly on a lover, then that same hand clips nails and uses a sharp blade to gently shave hair off a beloved. By juxtaposing close-ups of Clara's bloody hand with Joel's hairy one, the two characters are connected by a sense of fear conveyed by these uncanny/ monstrous images, and simultaneously by a sense of physical

intimacy. The spectator is then drawn in to this close circle of intimacy through the following series of close-ups on Clara and Joel's faces and her hands shaving his hairy back, images accompanied by their voices speaking softly and the sounds of the bath water rippling.

By not drawing back to create more distance between the camera and the characters or framing the mother and son so as to present the spectator with a freakish bathtime tableau, the camera does not let the viewer objectify the scene—instead, the sustained closeness of the camera, combined with the gentle soundscape, subsumes the strange and uncanny into quotidian domesticity. This moment invites the spectator into an instance of care that accepts the possibility of threat and unknowing. We dwell in uncertainties about Joel's body—will he attack Clara? Is he fully aware of his werewolf identity? These questions are never fully addressed, and as spectators the only information we have about how to understand and relate to Joel comes to us through Clara, the one with whom the camera is most often identified. She cues us to an empathetic sensibility. The film demonstrates that love and horror are not truly separate entities because bodies are changeable, unpredictable, and vulnerable to both experiencing and inflicting pain; love itself is transfiguration.

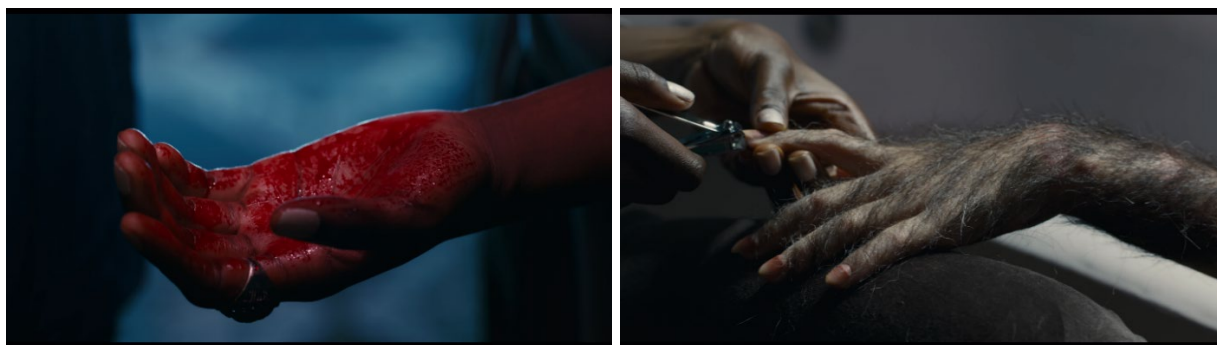


Fig. 8. Transition between Clara's bloodied hand in the dream, to Clara's hand clipping Joel's nails.

This notion comes to full fruition in the final scene, when Clara's touch is able to help Joel overcome his aggressive tendencies in order to develop an alliance against the other neighborhood denizens, who have discovered the truth about Joel and come to attack him with torches and pitchforks (recalling a scene from Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast*, a noted source of inspiration for the filmmakers). When Joel, having transformed into his werewolf form during a full moon, tries to attack his schoolmate Amanda, Clara shoots him in the leg (the aforementioned pivotal instance of violence). She takes him back home and chains him up in the *quartinho*, then carefully removes the bullet and cleans and binds his wound with her medical supplies. To calm Joel, who growls and lunges against his chains, Clara begins to sing to him the lullaby that she learned from Ana, then sung to Joel as a baby, while she lovingly rubs his hand. This is intercut with shots of the angry mob running through the streets in search of Joel (2:06:40-2:08:20). When they arrive and start to pound on the door, Clara unlocks Joel's chains, extends her hand to Joel in trepidation, and Joel places his hand in hers, before they both turn to face the mob together. The film ends abruptly there, not showing us whether mother and child survive the attack, but they are finally united, suggesting that Clara's full embrace of Joel in his werewolf form is the final resolution. Clara's touch, having guided the entire film's narrative, bravely invites the wildness of the monster, in all its unpredictability, and their love transgresses the boundaries of the human.

Conclusion

Returning to this chapter's epigraphs and Freud's idea that "man is wolf to man," contrasted with Audre Lorde's notion of the erotic and desire as a source of power, it would seem that one result of the modern/colonial system has been to cast "carnal powers of the flesh

and [the] elemental force of Eros” into the realm of the animal non-human, and equate it with death and destruction. Horror cinema, profoundly interested in investigating these binaries that structure our world, often enables generative interrogations of the relation between monstrosity, motherhood, and gender difference. The intertwining of horror and queer sensibilities in *As Boas Manieras* offers a way of turning toward monstrosity within embodied relations that allows for the unruly, an embrace of wildness despite the threat of bodily change. Along with other recent Brazilian hybrid-genre films, it also allows for a new form of reckoning with culturally conditioned feelings in the aftermath of historical and ongoing colonial violence, dispensing with a false sense of “good manners” meant to maintain hierarchical relations and prioritizing instead a radical empathy. Adopting a posthuman feminist perspective, the film invites a reorientation of the viewer’s sensorium away from disgust and fear of non-normative bodies and towards touch (a physical manifestation of queer love) as a source of healing transformation.

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VI. Conclusion

In May of 2025, as I write this, false narratives about Latinx immigrants, as well as queer and trans groups, proliferates across the United States, putting many lives at stake. Immigration and Customs Enforcement are being given free reign by the Trump administration to violently abduct people from their homes and communities, turning these abductions into a spectacle for the twisted enjoyment of an audience of people who presumably see these kidnappings as necessary for ridding their country of a violent and criminal element. One by one, the governments of Latin American countries are bowing to the demands of the Trump administration, agreeing to jail migrants in horrifying high-security prisons or otherwise prevent them from reaching the U.S. Reality has become distorted and nightmarish, and what seemed impossible for so long now has begun to materialize. In these circumstances, perhaps dystopian visions in art come closer to representing reality. Or more precisely, perhaps the speculative and fantastical modes are well equipped to help artists express certain truths, capturing feelings about the present moment that cannot be conveyed through more traditional modes of storytelling. These artists are, as Ursula K. LeGuin put it in her 2014 acceptance speech at the National Book Awards, “realists of a larger reality.” The speculative cinematic fictions I have analyzed here do not offer a straightforward sense of optimism and hope for a liberated future, however. They offer instead a powerful refusal to accept things as they are—an impulse to create other kinds of records, seek other expressions, and circumvent imposed binaries, from marginalized and peripheral viewpoints.

I have argued that to carry out these visions, contemporary filmmakers of monstrosity employ techniques that mobilize viewers’ senses in such a way as to make us vulnerable and

open to testimonies of both suffering and the formulation of loving bonds. As screens and videos become increasingly prevalent in our daily lives—from short-form video on social media, to the seemingly endless abyss of streaming television, to the constant barrage of online ads that compete to hold our attention and extract our time and data—cultivating a deeper understanding of the ways in which our emotions and embodiment are responsive to screened subjects seems a vital project. It becomes essential to understand how our senses become regulated in the service of separation and individualism, as Judith Butler notes (149). We must ask: who benefits the most from provoking feelings of extreme fear and anger, and who profits from viewers’ and consumers’ senses of helplessness and isolation?

The most effective response to this regulation of our emotions by dominant forces is not, however, to close ourselves off from our feelings, because making ourselves invulnerable to this type of manipulation also forecloses the possibility for emotional connection with others that could lead to effective political alliances. Writing about the notion of bodily vulnerability, Butler observes that the term “vulnerability” can function as a way of managing populations, establishing certain groups as “vulnerable populations,” or in more extreme circumstances within military and economic policy, targeting certain groups as injurable or disposable and thereby “[justifying] the infliction of injury upon [them],” such as state violence against undocumented subjects (143). At the same time, the acknowledgement of vulnerable populations can benefit advocates striving for “legal and institutional protection,” and therefore “the term has been used to establish a restrictive political logic according to which being targeted and being protected are the only two alternatives” (144). Butler encourages us to think differently about vulnerability, to understand it as a fundamental characteristic of the human (though we are not all equally vulnerable all the time). Our bodies are

formed and sustained in relation to infrastructural supports (or their absence) and social and technological networks or webs of relation, [and therefore] we cannot extract the body from its constituting relations—and those relations are always economically and historically specific. So if we say that the body is vulnerable, we are saying that the body is vulnerable to economics and to history... We could say that the body exists then in an ecstatic relation to the supporting conditions it has or must demand... (148)

To see ourselves as vulnerable therefore means understanding that the body is not self-enclosed but instead always in a process of (to use Deleuzian terminology) opening onto the body of an/other(s). The notions of vulnerability and interdependence can in this way become tools to resist and refuse the political and economic forces that aim to channel feelings toward profit, subjugation, and the atomization of individuals. To see ourselves as interdependent, in an “ecstatic relation” with other organic and non-organic bodies, can be a basis for coalitional politics, a rebellious assertion of the social aspect of embodiment. The use of “ecstatic” here is a reference to the original Greek work *ekstasis*, which means a condition of displacement or removal from one’s proper place, and it underscores the notion that extreme or unpredictable feelings and emotions can move us closer to others and displace us from our habitual modes of being and relating.

This desire for coalition is consistently expressed in the monstrous films I have discussed here, which feature unruly bodies that purposefully aim to evoke extreme feelings. In *Sleep Dealer*, Memo is able to forgive and connect with the drone pilot who killed his father, who helps him to carry out the destruction of the dam; Alma unites the women of the Monteverde household in an act of vengeance and reparation for Mayan communities in *La Llorona*; Juan, his estranged daughter, his best friend and his best friend’s son create strong emotional ties against

the rising tide of apathy (represented metaphorically as zombie hordes) in *Juan of the Dead*; Clara, Joel and Ana form lasting bonds in opposition to societal norms about the heteronormative nuclear family in *Good Manners*. The disruption of the hierarchical category of “Human” enacted in these narratives about zombies, werewolves, cyborgs, and ghosts also unsettles established divisions between self and other and disrupts institutional and social discourse that aims to erase or devalue personal, lived experience. Lived experiences of past and current trauma are expressed aurally as cries and dripping water in *La Llorona*, visually as empty expressions on zombie-like bodies shuffling down a Havana street in *Juan of the Dead*, or a physical glass enclosure limiting an impoverished Black woman to the “service entrance” of her employer’s apartment in *Good Manners*. These felt experiences are invoked in order to underscore the need for dismantling the structures that enable their perpetuation: they convey the double nature of vulnerability as both the result of a lack of infrastructural support, as well as a demand for a rewriting of social relations.

As I have argued, cinema is not an inert medium that passes through exhibition spaces without leaving a trace—whether in digital or analog form, on a small screen or a large one—because of its investments in affecting the body of the spectator, which becomes a relational entity that contributes to the film’s meaning and effect. As Laura Marks observes (utilizing a term proposed by Paul Rodaway), cinema has the capacity to diffuse into the world specific “sensuous geographies” (247) bringing spectators into contact with the culturally-specific sense memories of others. Each new viewing encounter both revives a memory or experience and creates a new possibility for expanding or shifting the boundaries of the viewer’s sense of subjectivity, yielding to another’s way of being. Monstrous cinema is interested in conveying the sensory experiences of marginalized or oppressed groups, even when not tied to a specific

historical event, and it aims to intensely impact the viewer's body through visual and aural techniques that move us to *feel with* a particular subject. By playing with and hybridizing genre conventions, it also encourages spectators to feel in unexpected ways that challenge traditional modes of genre cinema viewership.

Scholars of contemporary cinema are often concerned about cultural homogenization and the flattening of sense experience, given the increasingly global networks of film creation and distribution. Sophia A. McClennen points out that scholars of globalization such as Arjun Appadurai and Roland Robertson, responding to the "imperial model of globalization" assumed that it would translate into a homogenization of culture and therefore that in order to combat it, "cultural resistance should take the form of protection of diverse identities and the defense of difference" (4). Yet, McClennen argues that, despite what critics predicted in the 1990s, "today's neoliberal practices...actually encourage market diversification and...profit from the desire for difference" (4). She notes that previous critical frameworks that map the "winners and losers of globalization" according to "imperial geography" no longer serve to account for the current conditions of film production and circulation in the neoliberal era (4). Instead, a new paradigm is needed to understand the paradoxical nature of today's Latin American cinema resurgence, which both profits from market capitalism and critiques it. In fact, "the most commercially successful films from the region are socially progressive, politically engaged, and, in some cases, directly critical of capitalism." (6). This means that what is called for is an examination of the "contradictory practices that simultaneously turn local culture into reified commodity while also creating spaces for meaningful cultural resistance" (9).

While McClennen's work does not directly address the impact of globalization on the senses and emotions in Latin American cinema, I believe that more work should be done to

expand on her paradigm in terms of how feelings are generated and circulated through Latinx American cinema networks as currents of cultural resistance. In a recent interview at the 2025 Cannes film festival, Mexican director Guillermo Del Toro, who was debuting his new film *Frankenstein*, commented on the importance of emotion in his films in a moment in which he notes a lack of feeling within artistic production. He shared that he considers his film not as a horror film but as an emotional, personal story, proclaiming that “la emoción es el nuevo punk” (emotion is the new punk)⁴². This is a fascinating claim from a director who works almost exclusively in fantasy, gothic and horror genres, and it prompts the question, why then engage with genre at all? Does genre provide a shortcut to certain realms of emotion? How do the politics of emotion in Del Toro’s highly commercially successful genre films compare to the speculative engagements of the comparatively less successful films I analyze here? And does his seeming lack of engagement with specifically Latin American social issues and history, in favor of more “universal” stories and themes, limit a political reading of the senses and emotions in his films (or, what kind of ethics do his films promote)? My hope is that this dissertation becomes a starting point for examining these types of questions, and the politics of emotion in speculative Latinx American cinema more broadly.

The considerations of genre, the senses, and the political within a transnational hemispheric framework would also benefit from further attention to reception and an empirical analysis of domestic and international viewership practices. The monstrous cinema I have analyzed here, in contrast to films directed by, for example “The Three Amigos” (the condescending nickname for the trio of Mexico’s most globally recognized directors Guillermo Del Toro, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón), has had a relatively limited

⁴² <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2025/05/19/espectaculos/a07n1esp>

viewership⁴³. However, these filmmakers are still at the beginning of their careers, and it remains to be seen whether any of them will reach a comparable level of fame and an attendant increase in box office numbers. The fact that subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services, including Netflix, Prime Video, and Disney+, have begun commissioning and financing their own original movies and TV shows, changing the way and the rate at which content is produced across the globe, also merits closer examination for the ways in which these SVOD services are shaping the negotiation of the local and the global. Will the move away from communal screening practices limit the affective impact films have on viewers' bodies? The answers to these questions are still nebulous.

What remains clear for now is the sustained interest in speculative genres and their emphasis on monstrous bodies that defy clear categorization. The desire to create other worlds with alternate and less harmful ways of relating to other beings only seems to be increasing across all narrative forms. In the hands of politically committed filmmakers from the margins, monstrous Latinx American cinema exemplifies the critical posthumanist notion that a sustainable and sustaining future requires not only a tolerance of difference, but a profound recognition of our material embeddedness and vulnerability to one another as techno-biological beings. Falling neither into pessimistic humanist nostalgia nor utopian optimism about the future of the human, monstrous cinema inhabits the uncertain space between. It urgently affirms the necessity of disrupting hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality and refusing essentialism, while

⁴³ *La Llorona* grossed \$300,173 internationally (the majority of this amount coming from its month-long theatrical run in France, and no domestic box office information was available), *Good Manners* grossed \$31,177 domestically over its four-month run in Brazil (its only international release was in South Korea which had insignificant box office numbers), *Sleep Dealer* grossed \$80,136 domestically over its two-month run in the U.S. and \$28,771 internationally, and *Juan of the Dead* grossed \$97,509 internationally with theatrical releases in the United Kingdom, Mexico, and Bolivia (it did have a limited theatrical release in Havana but no box office numbers are available). These numbers can be compared to, for example, *The Shape of Water* (del Toro, 2017), which grossed \$63,859,435 domestically in the U.S. and \$131,931,359 internationally.

not presenting a clear path forward. It insists upon the importance of embodiment for perception and knowledge while unsettling the boundaries of the unified, exclusionary human subject. Without prescribing what it will look like, or whether it can last, it posits that another world is indeed possible.

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