

The Irony of Crime: Trivialization of Violence in Two Contemporary Mexican Films

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“The end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted. The means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.”

Hannah Arendt

It is impossible to refer to the violence that predominates in Mexico without considering the multiple social problems affecting this country such as: poverty, impunity, corruption, negligence, ignorance, racism, abuse of power, among many others. Undoubtedly, Mexican government has lost all credibility and its authority is constantly challenged and questioned by a civil society tired of its abuses. This general mistrust is generated by the disclosure of information through mass media that demonstrates the infiltration and involvement of prominent Mexican politicians and police members with organized criminals.

News and fatalities related to violence are part of a spectacle so common that its citizens simply are no longer surprised by now common crimes such as: torture, kidnapping, laceration, mutilation, rape, assassination, disappearance, execution, bribe, etc. These brutal crimes are mostly perceived as something trivial by a viewer/spectator not only used, but inclusive, amused or entertained with such dehumanization and violence presented on the screen. In this vein, Eduardo Subirats states that the culture of violence, which has proliferated in the world due to real and fictitious spectacles, is accepted as something normal: “The problem of violence in the contemporary world do not only reside in its quantitative proliferation in the everyday expressions or in the interior of our techno-industrial companies. The problem of violence is also its social normalization.” (69) According to Subirats, mass media and videogames are the cause of the banalization or trivialization of violence with two very specific purposes in mind: to maintain a passive attitude or “intellectual ataraxia” from the part of the civil society and to mobilize rabble (people) to favor racist and nationalist causes.” (39) It is interesting to note how these objectives are achieved:

The mediatic representation of real violence is neutralized by fictitious violence throughout identical and continuously repetitive sequences of crimes, rapes, disasters, or wars... The objective of this electronic banalization is to eliminate violence from the realm of our experience without having to remove it from our daily and historic reality. Beyond these mediatic strategies that intoxicate what is real, this violence points out to a radical limit of our civilization. (70-1)

This normalization of violence observed by Subirats, has also capture the attention of a variety of writers, scriptwriters, and filmmakers around the globe and Mexico is not an exception. In their works and film productions, they have tried to expose the mechanisms of social control used by those who are the beneficiaries of the perpetuation of an asymmetrical system of power. This system not only permits, but also promotes violence as a necessary instrument to maintain social order. As a response, a new generation of filmmakers in Mexico is using different strategies to produce and disseminate a culture of spectacle that entertains, but most importantly, questions, informs and shocks its spectators. The main purpose behind the production of these contemporary films is to eradicate, or at least diminish, the “intellectual ataraxia”, referred to by Subirats, which affects millions of Mexicans. *Conejo en la luna* (*Rabbit on the Moon*, 2004) written and directed by Jorge Ramírez Suárez and *Matando Cabos* (*Killing Ends*, 2004) written by Tony Dalton and directed by Alejandro Lozano represents two examples of the productions mentioned above.

In *Conejo en la luna*, prevails State violence in a corrupt and chaotic fictional world where politics and drug trafficking collude and converge, very similar in current Mexican reality. What is here represented is the institutionalized apparatus of oppression and social control, as well as the sinister and degenerative processes involving a political group determined to perpetuate itself in power. The words expressed by the Law Enforcement official, Macedonio Ramírez, and directed to Dr. Parra’s confessed assassin are pivotal in this story: “Here, nobody wants to know the truth.”

This phrase, precisely, alludes to the impossibility of finding an exit in this labyrinth formed by lies, intrigues, corruption, and perversion. Consequently, normalized violence, easily globalized, silence and dehumanize to those who pretend to reveal a “truth” easily manipulated. On the other hand, in *Matando Cabos*, trivialization of violence is exhibit not only through representation/repetition of fictional actions that, in words of Subirats, neutralize events occurred in real life; but most importantly, the criminal acts represented such as torture, kidnapping, and assassination fail to impact or produce any emotion to the spectator thanks to the ludicrous humor. By laughing, the spectator becomes in the fictional criminal accomplice since her/his ridiculous impassive attitude contributes to perpetuate the same crooked society that she/he is terrified of. In a tacit way, the observer accepts what is projected on the screen and takes part of that violence, ignoring that the seriousness of what is being represented is probably less cruel compared to that reality she/he is trying to avoid. Violence, thus, is represented as a banal and comic act capable to pulverize all human condition. Here is where the major challenge for the spectator emerges: the rejecting of such violence as something insignificant, hilarious, and trivial.

The title *Conejo en la luna*, as well as the *leit motiv* images dispersed through various scenes of the film, symbolize fertility and fatality in our collective imaginary. The mythic content of these two cultural elements anticipate a tragic double semblance: the moon luminosity refers to life (in this case the Mexican cultural life), and also represents everything that lies behind, hidden in the shadows, but that forms part of the same world. The plenitude of the moon is, consequently, a prelude to death. Likewise, *Conejo en la luna* alludes to the pre-Hispanic legend about the Quetzalcoatl deity. According to it, a rabbit (Antonio Santos) voluntarily sacrifices himself in order to satisfy Quetzalcoatl’s hunger (the Mexican ruined political system). However, in this film story, Santos does not voluntarily sacrifice himself; neither his figure is perpetuated nor praised by a grateful deity. On the contrary, Santos, who happened to be the author of such significant drawing in this story, is the scapegoat that exhibits the vulnerability of the common citizen confronted by the absolute power of the Mexican political apparatus. In this respect, the study published by Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*, focuses specifically on the human being’s vulnerability and the violence produced because of it. Each individual aspires to be autonomous. Still due to the fact that one’s body is constantly exposed to the public scrutiny, it is an impossible goal to achieve:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of other, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. (26)

Since we all are immersed in a social structure, we are all subjugated each other’s will. Violence, thus, is generated because our vulnerability is exposed and controlled by those who exert their wishes upon our bodies:

In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited. (29)

Specifically, in *Conejo en la luna*, violence is perpetrated from the highest political spheres. The destiny of millions of Mexican citizens is controlled by a variety of stratagems and power mechanisms such as: manipulation of the information distributed through the mass media, infiltration of the profitable drug trafficking business in politics, laundering of money in international banks, disappearance of incriminatory evidence (including the elimination of human evidence), absolute control over the people’s actions by using digital technology, and the cover up of political assassinations and criminal activities in general by those in charge of creating and applying laws, among others. Even though there are no specific dates mentioned in this film, the story is easily linked to the present Mexican situation seeing as the actions and incidents presented through the screen are parallel to actual events observed in Mexico during the last decades. What makes this film interesting is the combination of different places (Mexico City and London) and inaccurate facts (such as names of Mexican newspapers) as an aesthetic strategy favoring ambiguity and uncertainty. This technique is effective in making the spectator, especially the one who is familiar with the everyday life in Mexico, hesitant about whether or not the fictional story is real or not. The spectator can even doubt that the supposedly fictional story is more “real” than the one she/he knows. Torture and assassination are indiscriminately used as instruments of power to restore the reputation of the hegemonic political party and an apparent social order.

Both the lunatic killer of Dr. Parra as well as El Gordo Corona (“Chubby Corona”), who are subordinated to prevailing political figures, become the victims of the same political system that employs them. It is relevant to examine how this latter character represents the dishonest bureaucrat that defends not only his own, but also his boss’s personal economic interests. His intentions to sell communal farming terrains illicitly taken from their legitimate owners (Mexican peasants), and his involvement in hiring Dr. Parra’s lunatic killer are irrefutable evidence of his loyalty to the political party that is now trying to eliminate him. Dr. Parra’s assassination is, in particular, the detonator that sparks off diverse persecutions in order to cover up the criminal activities of those public officers in charge of safeguarding justice. Once the identity of people apparently involved in those crimes is revealed, they become enemies of the State. As such, the only possibility to restore this social “order” is by eliminating them. The case of Macedonio Ramírez deserves special interest since first he is a victimizer and, at the end of the story, becomes one more of the multiple victims affected by the irregularities prevailing in the Mexican government. As a federal officer, he is accused of being the last link of a delinquent chain that affects the political and judicial machinery. In other words, no other prominent public officer is prosecuted nor incriminated because they have been careful enough to maintain occult their identities.

Certainly, State violence is directed to every single individual in this chaotic society exposed in *Conejo en la luna*, including women and children. It is due to the impunity that prevails here that public officials can kidnap, torture, silence and murder women accused of being married to, what they consider to be, “dangerous” men. In this film two important cases affecting women are represented: the kidnapping, physical and psychological torture, and assassination of El Gordo Corona’s wife, and the kidnapping and physical and psychological torture of Julie, Antonio Santos’s wife. Even though these two women share similar characteristics –they are both married women and mothers belonging to a privileged upper middle class– there is also a crucial difference between them: El Gordo Corona’s wife is a Mexican woman, whereas Julie is from England. This fact is fundamental when analyzing the outcome of their destinies. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the analysis made by Neil Websdale and Meda Cheney-Lind, who have framed violence against women as part of “the structure of hetero-patriarchy.” (79) These critics affirm that it is impossible to analyze every single experience lived by a women without highlighting the social and cultural context where she is exposed. Websdale and Cheney-Lind also state “how men use violence against women in different cultural settings and social situations.”(79) “Male violence against women,” they argue, “is both a reflection of their sociopolitical domination over women, and, at the same time, yet another way of establishing control, maintaining it, or both.

To make sense of male violence against women, then, is to grasp the limited social, political, and economic opportunities available to women.” (79) The sociopolitical context concerning these two feminine characters is vital in understanding their personalities and behaviors. El Gordo Corona’s wife is a traditional Mexican woman who accepts the dominant cultural parameters without questioning them. In contrast, Julie epitomizes a transgressor of the dominant social discourse. A significant scene to exemplify this occurs when Julie uncovers her bosom to breastfeed her baby in front of both female and male guests invited to the Corona’s residence. The cultural conflict is evident, since all of the people around her (those from Mexican origin) perceive this as a vulgar and inconsiderate act from her part. One of the male characters, inclusively, affirms “this is the way all naughty “gringas” behave.” However, Julie sees breastfeeding as a natural and lovely act incapable of breaking the normative codes. The cases of El Gordo Corona’s wife and Julie, both kidnapped and tortured by Macedonio Ramírez, expose how vulnerable women are, especially when they are mothers. The study made by Judith Butler in regards to violence serves to analyze such cases. When she declares that human vulnerability increases because our bodies are subjected to the will of others, she disregards the significance of maternity.

These two characters previously mentioned, are manipulated and controlled not only by the pain inflicted physically, but also by the means of psychological torture suffered when they are physically separated from their babies and are made to believe their babies are being victimized as well. El Gordo Corona wife’s torture is the thought that her son will be sold for adoption, while Julie’s torment is to hear the incessant crying of her little girl (which has been taped and utilized by her captors as a means to distress her). Therefore, the violence is multiplied since it is not only directed to the mother’s bodies, but it is also projected to their descendants. In fact, something analogous occurs when El Gordo Corona and Antonio Santos suffer a psychological torture by knowing their loves ones, just like them, are being inflicted pain. It is also important to contemplate the matter of Antonio Santos. As a Mexican citizen, he is used to the daily atrocities involving Mexican authorities. This is the main reason why he tried to persuade his reluctant wife, Julie, to refuge herself in the English embassy to avoid any abuse.

As English national, she had not been exposed to the State violence, therefore she deems her husband's remarks to be exaggerated and paranoid. However, her opinion changes once she is arbitrarily detained. After days of being humiliated, beaten, locked in a foul room, and forced to remain calm, she realizes that her only possibility to escape from her captors –whom, incidentally, include two bad-tempered police women– is by characterizing the traditional woman role, meaning she must become docile and servile. The fact that she is “güerita” (white), foreign, and forbidden, all appealing aspects to men, helps her seduce Macedonio Ramírez in order to avoid being killed. In spite of the fact that she is able to escape, the possibility that she will be reunited with her husband is non-existent or vaguely remote, because the Mexican government is unwilling to enforce justice. The end of this story reveals the immorality of Mexican political authorities that are determined to invisibilize and illegitimize all ideas and acts that interfere with their perpetuation in power. As it is seen in this film, extreme violence serves as a means to control and dominate millions of vulnerable bodies. Alternatively, *Matando Cabos* is an original story represented by means of diverse stylistic techniques such as: language play, metafiction, multiplicity of perspectives, fragmented stories, documentary extract, oral tradition, and black comedy among others.

The playfulness of language, for instance, starts from the title. “Matar cabos” is alluding to the action of murdering –at least the intention to do so– the all-powerful, arrogant, and odious businessman Oscar Cabos. It goes beyond by suggesting the Spanish expression “atar cabos”, which means to put together pieces of evidence or, as appears in this case, to connect discontinuous stories. Likewise, the use of morbid, humorous, vulgar, and repetitive insults and idiomatic expressions is an effective method in diminishing the impact of virulent scenes related to violence in the spectator perception. That is to say, the verbal aggression contributes, in large part, to attract the spectator's attention and make her/him perceive the criminal acts represented in the screen as pure entertainment. Metafiction is also relevant in this film. It is defined by Patricia Waugh as the “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.” (2) This strategy is implemented in *Matando Cabos* by means of flashbacks, absurd documentary testimonies and digressions/hallucinations from the part of some characters such as: the pseudo documentary based both in Mascarita as well as in El Bizzo's tormented life, the romantic abstraction of El Canival and Graciela Cabos when they first meet, and the Mascarita's hallucination when he is driving his beloved antique car.

This latter scene is clearly a reference to the popular 60's Mexican movies in which the protagonist, Santo, “El enmascarado de Plata” (Saint, the Silver Masked Hero), fought a group of feminine aliens eager to take over the world. Furthermore, this film can also be seen as homage paid to Avant-garde films such as: *Pulp Fiction*, *Taxi Driver*, *Y tu mamá también*, and other films where violence is viewed through innovative film techniques. Clearly, the oral tradition also takes a pivotal part in this film. The opening shots present two friends, El Jaque and El Mudo defecating in one of the restrooms at the company owned by Oscar Cabos, while El Jaque is narrating different well known stories about the extremely cruel businessman Cabos. Suddenly, his telling is interrupted by El Mudo, who asks El Jaque to hand him some toilet paper. This act of interrupting what is being narrated in order to satisfy a banal necessity, as well as the scatological context in where it occurs, delegitimizes the narrative and cinematographic cultural purposes. In addition, the voice of Cabos (the multimillionaire tycoon who happened to be unconscious) contradicting what these two friends are recounting about some specific moments in his life, can be interpreted as a warning to the spectator. Since all stories are told from a particular point of view, they are subjective, flexible, and, thus, easy to manipulate.

The viewer should not accept any story without questioning the intention of the teller. On the contrary, it is necessary to consider multiple perspectives after analyzing and criticizing them. In this film, violence is constantly and evidently normalized as is seen in the numerous shots where crimes are presented. The cited opening shots serve also to exemplify how the more unscrupulous acts such as mutilation, torture, assassination, pursuit, and kidnapping are represented as something unimportant, grotesque, and even funny. El Jaque and El Mudo seem to be indifferent and calm despite the fact that they are in an apprehensive situation. In general, all characters, just like these two friends, appear to be apathetic even when their own life is at risk. Mascarita, as an illustration, is answering a phone call from his friend El Jaque in a civil manner while simultaneously brutally beating a terrified man for the petty reason of having called him by his surname.

Gabriela Cabos, on the other hand, hears the news about her husband's abduction unperturbed; supposedly because she thinks this phone call is just a lie used by her husband to excuse him for participating in her birthday party. Her behavior can only be explained because she is as frivolous, unfaithful, and corrupt as her husband. The parallels with the current Mexican circumstances in *Matando Cabos* are evident. Kidnapping, in particular, is the central point in this complex pluridimensional story. Botcha plans to take hostage of Oscar Cabos in order to avenge his father, who has been humiliated by Cabos for several years. Ironically, Botcha not only fails to obtain the money requested to free the entrepreneur, but even worst, ends up kidnapping and mutilating his respected and loved progenitor, who had stolen his enemy's identity. It is evident that this story resembles the Oedipus Rex, the Sophocles play. The paradoxical case of Lula is perhaps more significant. She first voluntarily accepts to collaborate in the capture of her best friend's father, Oscar Cabos, but later is forced by Botcha to become a servile and docile accomplice. In other words, she is a victimizer who, nevertheless, is also a victim in the hands of a man more savage and extremist than her.

Both Lula and Nico are brutally beaten and controlled by Botcha and, once he is killed, Nico turns out to be Lula's victimizer. Lula, as a woman, is more vulnerable to be abused by men, but her condition is far more pitiful given that she is a drug addict. This does not demonstrate solidarity to other women, as it is seen when she betrays her best friend. Therefore, in this film on human denigration, it exhibits that there is no such thing as an innocent victim; on the contrary, every single character is susceptible to violence. In general terms, Oscar Cabos epitomizes the abuse of power because he hits, humiliates, insults, tortures, and even eliminates with total impunity those who contradict his wishes or make him mad. His privileged position, as a rich and influential businessman, allows him to subjugate other men even more rich than him. In this precise part, there is a direct mention to "el de teléfonos" (the owner of the Mexican phone company, Carlos Slim, the second richest man on Earth), who was apparently present when Cabos burned the Chinese cook. As it is demonstrated in this film, in Mexico, a rich man can do as he pleases; still he is also vulnerable to being kidnapped since police officers are completely absent when they are most needed. In spite of its apparently personal motivation, the first objective in Cabos abduction is the monetary remuneration, as it happens in all the actual cases.

Equally noticeable in this film is the violence perpetrated in Mexico City. The use of fusils and guns reserved to the military personnel as well as the high speed persecutions in the streets of this tumultuous and unruly city are possible because, again, there are not police to protect its citizens. The dehumanization is patent in all social classes, but specially affects the high levels of society. Rich families are absorbed by idleness and the consumption of illegal drugs is common. Consequently, drug trafficking generates more wealthy people, but also as a general rule, more bloodshed and atrocities. It is well known that drug dealers in Mexico acquire immense fortunes and power. As such, they are respected and even immortalized in the now popular "narcocorridos" (traditional Mexican songs dedicated to celebrate their adventures and deeds). This is clearly observed in the shot when El Jaque and El Mudo sing "La reina de Polanco", an apology to the drug producers and dealers. When the camera glides over Gabriela Cabos' guests, we witness the joyfulness and enthusiasm this song brings to these previously bored people. They sing and dance frantically in spite of the fact that the lyrics of this song refer to a powerful criminal capable of achieving everything in life, inclusive, the love of the woman he likes by means of money. As we have seen, both *Conejo en la luna* and *Matando Cabos* are two alternative cinematographic discourses that present painful, but current problems confronted by millions of Mexican nationals. The fictional stories analyzed here represent violence from a multiplicity of angles and perspectives trying to shock and awaken from their lethargy the spectators. Their message is patent, violence should not be accepted as something normal or habitual; it is the responsibility of people to become aware of all its destructive effects.

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