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## The Politics of Sensations: Body and Texture in Contemporary Cinema and Literature (Argentina - Cuba - Ireland)

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THE POLITICS OF SENSATIONS: BODY AND TEXTURE IN  
CONTEMPORARY CINEMA AND LITERATURE  
(ARGENTINA – CUBA – IRELAND)

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdisciplinary Program in Comparative Literature

by  
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Esta tesis doctoral está dedicada a mis padres, mis hermanos y mi hermana, quienes han colaborado conmigo a la distancia con afecto, curiosidad, empuje y sobre todo, respeto por la labor que llevo a cabo. Y también a Mason, quien ha sido la base emocional que ha dirigido todo este proyecto.

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## ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I argue that the human body and physical sensations are not only objects or metaphors that appear in cultural artifacts, but also means of political representation. There are cultural artifacts with a corporeal dimension in which human bodily sensations and states, such as sexual arousal, disease, and pain, are represented. The body becomes a dimension integrated in the discursive form of the artwork. The (literary or cinematic) text evokes a *texture*, a sensitive skin. This corporeal means is politically engaged with the context in which the artwork has been produced: The body becomes a space of political inscription and struggle, and a device to discursively/corporeally “fight” back. Particularly, I explore a selection of the contemporary cinematic and literary productions in Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland that present political, social, and cultural transformations that took place from the end of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. In order to explain my ideas, I refer to E. K. Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*, and I expand on one of the concepts that she presents: *texture*. As I describe it in my dissertation, *texture* is the artwork’s corporeal dimension that appeals to the internal dimension of the body (i.e., pain, sickness, sexual arousal) through a discursive materiality (a particular artistic language—in this case, the cinematographic and the literary) that entails a political postulate. Unlike Sedgwick, I consider texture in this dissertation as a plausible analytical notion, a sort of magnifying glass with which to observe the dynamics of corporeality and artistic discourse in literature and cinema. The writers studied include Irish novelist and journalist Colm Tóibín, the Argentine poet and essayist Néstor Perlongher, and the Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas. In terms of the filmmakers, I analyze some films directed by Santiago Loza, Iván Fund, Fernando Pérez, Peter Sheridan, Marco Berger, Paula Markovitch, Peter Mullan, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Lucrecia Martel, Deborah Warner, and Carlos Quintela.

## INTRODUCTION

On January 7<sup>th</sup> 2014, three-year-old Luciana Rodríguez was declared dead in a clinic in the city of Mendoza, Argentina, after her step-father beat her all over her body. The entire province was shocked. Tension grew further when newspapers exposed that different government agencies that deal with child abuse knew about Luciana's family situation, and thus likely could have prevented her death. Days later, family members and friends organized a protest in the city's center to demand the resignation of all government officials that "helped kill Luciana." As a way to make their statement even clearer, protesters held two images of the little girl: one of her alive, and one of her corpse – all bruised and lifeless (see Figure 1). Suddenly, the image of Luciana's body became a tool for a political demonstration, a means to make a statement more evident and effective, as if her corporeal pain and suffering would provide a more real dimension to what the protesters demanded.



Figure 1: Protesters demanding for government's officials resignation.

In February 2014, the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, gave activists an opportunity to protest against the government's oppression of LGBT rights. Their aim was to make everyone aware of the constant violence, persecution, and indifference promoted and committed by the government and several sectors of society. Various political demonstrations condemned social oppression that increases the number of suicides among teenagers. The website *ViceNews*

recorded a group of activists that laid on the floor covered in artificial blood (see Figure 2). Next to them, another person held a sign asking for a stop to the growing rates of suicides in their community. The demonstration did not last long because the police arrived and arrested all of them. Like Luciana Rodríguez's family and friends, the LGBT activists found the representation of corporeal pain and wounded bodies to be effective means to make their statement more evident and more real.



Figure 2: Protesters demanding a stop of growing rates of suicides among LGBT teenagers.

Why? How can pain and physical suffering become effective modes to convey a political statement more directly? In some way, the representation of the wounded body seems to summarize what words express differently. Are there other forms of corporeality and physical sensations that are used as vehicles for political purposes? How do artworks deal with the potentiality of bodies as political devices and the materiality of their artistic expression – such as a series of images in cinema or words in literature, for example? These are some of the main questions that have led to the development of this dissertation. In my study, I argue that the human body and physical sensations are not only objects or metaphors that appear in cultural artifacts, but also means of making political statements. The body becomes a mode of knowledge, a corporeal “language” that interacts with the formal elements that constitute a work of art, like the words in literature or the images in a film, for instance.

When one declares that the object of study is the body in film and literature and its representation – what the body "means" in these works of art –, there is always a mystery left unresolved: How does the body appear in a work of art? Or even, how can the body be “present” in a novel or a film, if what you have in front is simply an image on the screen or a group of words? When one says that the body has become a crucial and highly political device, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, the same mystery arises: How is it possible that the body appears in a discursive materiality (verbal or visual texts, for example) so different from what one understand by “body”? This flesh, what I feel now, at this moment; this limited, deceitful group of sensations I call my body. How does corporeality<sup>1</sup> pass beyond the borders of the skin to inscribe itself in other formulas?

In the introduction to her book *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that an unexplained dimension of human suffering exists. She explains:

When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth. (3)

We could take this postulate and apply it to other forms of embodiment and other ways of feeling: When the body is sexually aroused or when the body is sick and medicated, for example.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to bring up the discussion around the term “corporeality,” in which Maurice Merleau-Ponty has a capital role. Marta López Gil, in her book *El cuerpo, el sujeto, la condición de mujer*, explains Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of corporeality presented in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). For him, the entire unit of our senses, moves, and words must be located in a broader dimension that includes other bodies and the entire world. In other words, the body and its senses imply an inherent coexistence with others. There are no limits between the body, the world, and others. No separation between feeler and felt bodies. This conception of the body inhabiting the world opens up a new consideration for the dimension of the other as part of the Self. López Gil explains: “estoy instalado en el cuerpo del otro así como el cuerpo del otro está instalado en el mío. En lugar de corporeidad, “intercorporeidad”. [...] nuestro cuerpo se experimenta por la mediación de la experiencia corporal de nuestro prójimo” (167) [I am settled in the other’s body as well as the other’s body is settled in mine. Instead of corporeality, “inter-corporeality”. [...] our body is experienced by the mediation of the corporeal experience of our fellow other.] Merleau-Ponty’s conception of corporeality (a term used frequently in this research) as something that it is inherently living in contact with others may sustain the conceptualization of “texture” as both a political and formal device present in artworks.

If we speak here of an inner feeling unable to be real unless it comes to the surface, is art the most accurate way to represent this emergence? One of the first ideas explained by Scarry is that all language is inadequate to represent pain. Moreover, she affirms, “Physical pain not only resists language but actively destroys it, causing an immediate reversion to a previous state of language, to the sounds and cries that the human being makes before learning the language” (4). But, then, what about art? Scarry, quoting Virginia Woolf, declares the almost complete absence of literary representations of pain: “Alarmed and killed by his own failure to language, the person with pain may find comfort to know that even the artist - whose life and daily habit are dedicated to refine and extend discourse reflexes - ordinarily silently surrenders to pain”(10). However, Scarry says that there are works, few and isolated, in which this does not occur, and therefore provide a useful, convincing portrayal of pain (10).

Ann Jurencic, in *Illness as Narrative* (2012), refers to this possibility presented by Scarry and criticizes her. She claims that most of Scarry’s arguments may be valid in regard of torture, but not for all forms of pain. Since Jurencic’s concern deals with chronic pain and disease in literature, she opens again the question about the validity of the literary expression to represent them effectively (44). Actually, Jurencic re-directs the question not completely to the modes to make pain representable in literature, but rather more to the necessity of studying its reception. She assumes that the representation of pain and disease are a given, due to the extensive number of writers that have registered their own sufferings in their works.

Echoing Veena Das, Jurencic rejects Scarry’s idea that pain destroys language, and affirms that “transactions between body and language ... allow for the construction of pain’s meaning.” As she explains:

In Scarry's framework, language fails because it cannot refer to a pain that is objectively knowable by another. Das, however, does not expect language to name pain as an objective reality. She maintains that expressions of pain perform in the imaginative register, by which she means that, because pain cannot be fully expressed or known, approximate understanding is always constructed imaginatively. (62)

In this sense, pain (and other bodily sensations) can be represented, but only with the support of imagination. In other words, corporeal representations require some crafting that balances the internal dimension of the body and the materiality of the artistic discourse. So then, how does a political purpose find its place in this interstitial dimension, in this intricate balance? Although this discussion has served as a foundation, this dissertation does not aim to continue a purely linguistic or solely formal study that exposes the modes in which bodily sensations find a way to be expressed artistically. The interest of my study lies in the political uses of corporeal sensations and bodily representations in contemporary cinema and literature.

What I argue is that there are cultural artifacts that are indeed able to represent human bodily sensations and states, such as sexual arousal, disease, and pain. But the body is not only something that can be "spoken." It becomes a dimension that coexists alongside the discursive form of the artwork. The (literary or cinematic) text evokes a *texture*, a sensitive skin, and its corporeal means is politically engaged with the context in which the artwork has been produced. In this dissertation, I adopt the concept of texture as an analytical device that encompasses the corporeal dimension of an artwork and its political agenda, encrypted in the liminality of its embodiment and its discursive materiality.

### **The Politics of Texture: Theoretical Framework**

The main challenge that I encounter in this study is to observe this liminal space between what the body feels and what the codes in a text (words or audiovisual images) communicate; in other words, what the flesh experiences and how is this translated into a discourse. If texts, as

Scarry and Jurencic argue, cannot completely bear the internal dimension of the body, how is it possible to observe and analyze the interstice between what is said (the discourse) and what is impossible to say (the body)? These concerns have an epistemological impact on the proposals that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick presented in her book *Touching Feeling: Affects, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003).

When Sedgwick observes the photograph of Judith Scott, a talented artist hugging her sculptures, she noticed that the picture revealed more than one might expect. Scott is a color-blind woman who has Down syndrome, but who was able to put together a series of sculptures made of yarn, cord, rope, and other fibers. Sedgwick feels captivated by the emotional connection she experiences with the picture: In a way, Scott shows her affection for her own work, which demonstrates a deep emotional and affective knowledge that eludes any verbal or linguistic code. Scott cannot talk or write, and was also diagnosed as “uneducable”. However, one can see some sort of certainty expressed in the texture of the sculpture and the affection of the artist towards her own work (see Figure 3). This is the dimension that Sedgwick wants to discuss and proposes as the main site for beginning cultural investigation.



Figure 3: “Judith Scott in 1999”. Photo by Leon Borensztein.

According to Sedgwick, current studies have reached a point in which uninventiveness has become a common factor. The “critical paranoia” that has dominated contemporary cultural research has prevented new approaches from arising. Her main argument consists in the criticism of privileging the epistemological, “since a relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge, obscures our experience of those structures” (Hemmings 553). This is what motivates Sedgwick’s urgency not only to reject dualistic thought, but also to explore whatever seems to exist beyond the “apparent common sense” (6). According to Sedgwick, there is so much that exists and that has meaning in an area beyond linguistic understanding: Her book “wants to address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do...” (6).

For Sedgwick, rather than thinking “beyond” or “beneath”, thinking “beside” allows theory to separate itself from dualities because one can find other forms of relation than “opposition” or “cause-effect.” In this sense, Sedgwick places two important concepts in the dimension of the beside-ness that serve as the foundation of her book: Texture and affect. Although these terms seem to simplify Sedgwick’s concerns, both concepts reveal complexities that connect epistemology with phenomenology. First, texture seems to refer simply to our sense of touch, our capacity to perceive objects by touching. However, Sedgwick’s understanding of texture goes beyond this:

I haven’t perceived a texture until I’ve instantaneously *hypothesized* whether the object I’m perceiving was sedimented, extruded, laminated, granulated, polished, distressed, felted, or fluffed up. Similarly, to perceive texture is *to know or hypothesize* whether a thing will be easy or hard, safe or dangerous to grasp, to stack, to fold, to shred, to climb on, to stretch, to slide, to soak (13-14, my italics).

Sedgwick’s idea of texture deals with a “knowledge” or “hypothesis” perceived by our sense of touching, “even more immediately than other perceptual systems.” One can also touch



“to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object” (14). What Sedgwick intends to highlight is the existing system of perception capable of perceiving beyond our senses (i.e., connected to a sort of knowledge that appears “anterior” to the actual touch.) Texture seems to be an intuitive corporeal dimension that coexists in the cultural artifact alongside the verbal dimension; it refers to a corporeal presence that appeals to our senses, to our corporeal knowledge, our capacity to “know” how something feels even when we do not “feel” it *per se*.

Although Sedgwick seems to emphasize the sense of touch, she affirms that “texture itself is not coextensive with any single sense, but rather tends to be liminally registered ‘on the border of properties of touch and vision’” (15). Indeed, touch is not the only sense involved in the concept of texture, because this “can itself be understood as a sensory mixing” (Nealon 228). As she explains, we can hear the crispiness of a biscuit or observe the tenderness of a marshmallow.

In addition, Sedgwick’s compromise with the beside-ness also allows her to bring up the concept of affect as an essential mode to relate oneself to other people and things. How to define affect? Sedgwick’s conceptualization of this term relates to other thinkers’ perspectives, such as Silvan Tomkins.<sup>2</sup> Clare Hemmings explains that rather than considering affects as simple emotions, one can assume broadly that they are “states of being” (551). According to Hemmings, “An affect theory is all our affective experiences to date that are remembered (or better, perhaps, registered) in the moment of responding to a new situation, such that we keep a trace, within our

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<sup>2</sup> As Seigworth and Gregg explain, the affect theory presents at least two different directions nowadays, and in one of them Sedgwick becomes a main referent. “Undoubtedly the watershed moment for the most recent resurgence of interest and intrigue regarding affect and theories of affect came in 1995 when two essays – one by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (“Shame in the Cybernetic Fold”) and one by Brian Massumi (“The Autonomy of Affect”) – were published. ... These two essays from 1995, along with subsequent work undertaken by their authors, have given substantial shape to the two dominant vectors of affect study in the humanities: Silvan Tomkins’s psychobiology of differential affects (Sedgwick and Frank) and Gilles Deleuze’s Spinozist ethology of bodily capacities (Massumi).” (5)

constitution of those experiences” (552). Unlike Tomkins who sees affects attached to bodily drives, Sedgwick considers affects as part of a broader dimension: They have a greater freedom than drives because they can be attached to everything (19). They are not solely emotions that function as a “vehicle or manifestation of an underlying libidinal drive” (18), but an emotional disposition and awareness that connects us to the world. What Sedgwick presents before cultural theory is the liberty to ask oneself not what we understand from a work of art, but what we “feel” (perceive/experience) from it. The affects, then, are closely related to the perspective of bodies and corporeality in relation to the world. When one affirms that we will primarily look at how we feel rather than at how we understand, the body becomes a privileged prism through which we confront the world. As Doss affirms, affect has been embraced by Sedgwick and Massumi “as a means of overcoming Western binaries (like the mind/body divide) and reinserting ‘the body,’ and hence physical sensation and emotional conditions, into contemporary cultural theory” (9).

The fact that Sedgwick puts together (with no periods or commas) “touching” and “feeling” in the title of her book refers to her intuition of a particular intimacy that subsists between textures and emotions (17). Both touching and feeling refer to a double meaning: To feel with my skin and to be touched by emotions. Sedgwick actually affirms that “even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact” (17). Her interest for these ambivalent terms is related to her objective of framing a new model for cultural theory. She affirms:

If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together, then, it is not because they share a particular delicacy of scale, such as would necessarily call for ‘close reading’ or ‘thick description.’ What they have in common is that at whatever scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological. (21)

Her epistemological ambition becomes phenomenological, because both textures and affects are strongly related to our bodily senses. In this manner, Sedgwick not only presents the body as the space from which one makes contact or gets in touch with the world, but also as an

epistemological shift not considered by contemporary cultural thinking. If affects and textures are attached to everything and our bodily awareness perceives them in our everyday encounter with the world, what should the importance of bodily experiencing be in our research?

So, if the artwork represents the body, what it largely represents is a certain texture and affect perceivable by other bodies. In other words, if we encounter a body's wounds, an enormous amount of affects will arise because a certain texture will be perceived; a certain knowledge that allows us to feel and experience these wounds will have an impact on us. To represent wounds, sickness, or sexual desire means to evoke this dimension of the beside-ness, because it is there where affects and texture are put in motion. To represent pain, illness, or arousal is to make one "feel" an idea, to sense, to intuit an intellectual concern; it requires making bodies agents which intervene in understanding through forms which are not solely linguistic.

Although affects have become a trending notion for many current academic studies, my concern deals with the other concept presented by Sedgwick: Texture. Compared to "affect", the scarcity of further analysis of this term is noticeable in academic literature. Thus, I would like not only to return to the definition provided by Sedgwick, but also to the possibility of highlighting this notion and taking it in another direction.

When Sedgwick introduces "texture," she refers to an article by Renu Bora ("Outing Texture"), published in a 1997 book Sedgwick herself edited (*Novel Gazing. Queer Readings in Fiction*). In this text, Bora analyzes Henry James' *The Ambassadors* and, more particularly, the corporeal descriptions that reveal an awakening of (homo)sexual desire in the main character. According to Bora, the novel presents Chad's body, his beauty, his "texture," in such an erotic way that it makes the main character, Strether, pose two questions: "1) how did he get that way? 2) What do I want to do with him?" (94). For Bora, these are key questions, because they reveal two

important concerns regarding the nature of texture: 1) an interest for the material history of what is described (how it came to be? How it came to have that particular texture?); and 2) a desire to act upon this material (what do I want to do with it?).<sup>3</sup>

I find the second question particularly interesting, because it reveals the intrinsic, interactive property of texture. To perceive texture, then, implies making the body an active agent that interacts with what it encounters: For Bora, sexual desire in James' *The Ambassadors*, for example. By echoing Bora, Sedgwick affirms that "to perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of *active* narrative hypothesizing, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time" (13, my italics). In other words, texture implies a corporeal agency, since it appeals to readers (in literature) and viewers (in cinema) through corporeal means.

For Sedgwick, "texture seems like a promising level of attention for shifting the emphasis of some interdisciplinary conversations away from the recent fixation on epistemology ... by asking new questions about phenomenology and affect" (17). She seems to be more interested in the epistemological possibilities of the term than in its analytical application. She advocates for a "reparative reading," a new attitude for cultural research. Unlike Sedgwick, I consider texture in this dissertation as a plausible analytical notion, a sort of magnifying glass with which to observe the dynamics of corporeality and artistic discourse in literature and cinema.

The interactive quality of texture revealed by Bora, and continued by Sedgwick, helps me to emphasize the ability of artworks to appeal to readers/viewers through corporeal means. Yet, to

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<sup>3</sup> These concerns made Bora differentiate two terms: TEXTURE and TEXXTURE. As he explains, "the first meaning, signifies the surface resonance or quality of an object or material. That is, its qualities if touched, brushed, stroked, or mapped, would yield certain properties and sensations that can usually be anticipated by looking". (98) TEXXTURE, however, becomes a more complicated term. As Sedgwick explains, "Texxture is the kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being. A brick or a metal work pot that still bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making would exemplify texture in this sense." (14)

appeal to what? To say what? What I argue is that corporal representations function as means to make a certain political statement. In my understanding, the body becomes a political device whose “language” or discursive representation interacts with the formal dimension of a work of art. In this way, texture appears as politically engaged and perceivable by the skin. For me, texture could be not only an epistemological possibility, but also an analytical device with which to observe the political statements proposed by the body.

The unfolding of the direction that I give to the notion of texture and its characterization is based on the analysis of a selected group of contemporary films, novels, an autobiography, and a short story, all from either Argentina, Cuba and Ireland from the end of the twentieth century to more current years. All of the material chosen for this research refers to different historical conditions and social circumstances from these nations; yet, all of them utilize corporeality as a means to postulate a certain criticism about their own socio-political and economic contexts.

### **How to Feel/Think Texture: Methodological Challenges**

The main challenge I have encountered in this dissertation is to define what would be the most appropriate and most accurate methodology of study. As I have already expressed, observing and analyzing the interstitial space between the materiality of discourse (the literary and the cinematic texts) and the body presents clear challenges, such as how to reveal and study the manners in which texts construct and appeal to corporeal sensations.

Although Sedgwick proposes new epistemological directions for the study of cultural works, it remains obscure the mode in which texture and affect can actually be exposed and analyzed. Clearly, the concept of the “beside-ness” allows one to enter a dimension not explored before since this seems to abandon previous forms of analytical approaches. Yet, it is not in Sedgwick’s interest to delineate a methodology to observe the function of affects and texture in

artworks. Sedgwick was very aware that her proposal surpasses the logics of the discipline; as she expresses herself, “I have ... taken a distinct step to the side of deconstructive project of analyzing apparently nonlinguistic phenomena in rigorously linguistic terms” (6). Her analysis does not attempt to expose linguistically what inhabits a nonlinguistic dimension because this, for her, would mean to privilege the former. She explains:

*Touching Feeling* wants to address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do, rather than submit to the apparent common sense that requires a strict separation between the two and usually implies an ontological privileging of the former. (6)

She also expresses that what seems to separate the linguistic and the nonlinguistic is in permanent change and escapes a definitive articulation (6). Sedgwick’s epistemological position seems to be an attractive paradigm that invites researchers to observe a dimension approachable now that the “paranoia” of the common sense can be abandoned. But, is it really “abandoned”? Is a “dualistic thinking” actually disregarded?

It is difficult for her (as for many others that study affects) to ignore the strong tendencies of critical practice and to find a way to put on paper something that cannot be expressed completely, something that is instead felt (some of this concerns are explored in the following section). But Sedgwick remains convinced of the idea that rejecting the pursuit of common sense would take her approach to new sites of cultural analysis. Her gesture attempts to provide to those nonlinguistic phenomena (what is touched and what is felt) the same level of attention given to the linguistic. Her ambitious program, however, leaves us with a not-so-clear mode to acknowledge the dimension of the corporeal or the affective. This, it seems, must be adjusted and negotiated in each attempt to analyze this dimension; and more particularly, when one studies its political implications.

These methodological limitations could be related to those experienced by the discipline of comparative literature, which also presented challenges when writing this dissertation. René Wellek's 1958 lecture "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" exposed the discipline's limitations and challenged its critics to observe the modes in which they presented their studies. Although the merit of combating the false isolation of national literatures was valid for Wellek, he pointed out that comparative literature was lacking of a clear methodology and object of study. As he affirms: "The most serious of the precarious state of our study is the fact that it has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology" (282). His concern motivated and deepened new and intensive discussions around the discipline.

In the Latin American context, María Teresa Gramuglio appears as a reference for these concerns through several of her articles dedicated to the scope of comparative literature. In 2006, she exposed in her article "Tres problemas para el comparatismo" [Three Problems for Comparatism], what she considers three paradoxes that face current studies in this discipline. The first is how to provide a comparatist approach to national literatures while maintaining the idea that a literature can be national? (i.e., how to study Argentine literature observing its supranational connections and still maintain the idea that a literary expression can be limited by geographical and cultural boundaries?). For her this is one of the most important paradoxes in current comparatist studies. The second problem for Gramuglio can be phrased in the following question: What are the methods to study various national literary works while also avoiding the mere addition or juxtaposition of national "cases"? For Gramuglio, a comparatist study lies not in the mere juxtaposition of several analyses regarding different cases, but in the critical observation of the issues or the matter that guide the contrast of such cases. In other words, there must be a third element that emerges from the comparison, that "no es deducible de los objetos de la comparación,

sino ... de la precomprensión y el interés del intérprete” (13) [is not deducible from the objects of comparison, but rather comes from the pre-comprehension and interest of the interpreter.] Finally, she raised the question of how to analyze comparatively different forms of artistic expression (literature and painting, for example) without falling into the area of aesthetics. For Gramuglio, it is important to measure the effects of the transactions between nonverbal and verbal artistic forms by observing the transformations of the structural qualities that the artistic forms have on each other.

It is not my ambition to propose a certain methodology to study affects or texture, nor to delineate a direction for comparative studies. But during the process of writing this dissertation, I have encountered this range of methodological and theoretical challenges that needed to be considered in order to find a determinate route to pursue my purpose: To expose and analyze the political implications of corporeality. The analysis presented in this dissertation attempts to continue Sedgwick’s epistemological proposal of “beside-ness” by emphasizing above all the corporeal dimensions of the artworks. But certain historical or theoretical connections were made to envisage the political significance of these dimensions. Thus, referring to the texture of these artworks presented an intricate liminal space in theoretical and methodological terms.

Since the aim of this dissertation is to observe comparatively the politics of texture, it is important to consider the contextual conditions in which each artwork was produced. This is why I have chosen three nations whose cultural, historical, and sociological factors are familiar to me due to my personal experience and past research. This helps me to be aware of how their contexts appear in the selected films and literary texts. I work with Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland because this facilitates my consideration of the contextual incidence on the configuration of corporeal representations in each nation and it helps me to compare the ulterior political role of such



representations in each national scenario. But again, one of Gramuglio's problems arises: How to work comparatively with three different nations in a supranational manner while maintaining the idea of a "nation" itself? This could appear as a contradiction not only for this dissertation, but for the entire discipline of comparative literature as Gramuglio states. In fact, some of the artworks selected for the different analysis expose this paradox even more: The film *El premio* (2011) was directed by Argentine-born Paula Markovitch, who exiled herself to Mexico when she was a little girl. So, technically, the production is Mexican – and it even won the Ariel Award as Best Film in 2013, a prize given solely to Mexican productions. Similar cases could be found in films like *The Last September* (1999) directed by the Deborah Warner or *The Magdalene Sisters* (2001) directed by Scottish filmmaker Peter Mullan. Although these films clearly deal with historical issues in Ireland, the productions are mostly British. What defines a national cinema – in this case, Irish cinema?<sup>4</sup> Again, these are concerns that surpass the purpose of this dissertation, but they were clear challenges in the definition of a methodological approach. I decided to enter this problematic area regarding national boundaries and their methodological use after considering above all the value of such notions. By observing the contextual circumstances that the delimitation of a national tradition can provide, I was able to envisage the political role of corporeal representations comparatively.

Regarding Gramuglio's second problem for comparative literature, another important question appeared as a challenge when writing this dissertation: How might one compare different cases without presenting a mere juxtaposition? In order to confront this issue, each chapter considers all three nations together and analyzes different artworks separately but also developing

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<sup>4</sup> Lance Pettit exposes the limitations and problems of referring to a unified idea of Irish cinema. As he explains: "Despite a revival in film production since the relaunch of the Irish Film Board (1993) and the early work of the Northern Ireland Film Council (1991), the idea of Irish cinema is still problematic: it's less a completed building in which one can safely walk around than a construction site where a critical hardhat is required" (61).

a dialogue between them. Various theoretical and historical backgrounds are traced in each chapter to produce a uniform comparative analysis for the selected group of works. Its aim is to delineate the particular form in which corporeality appeals politically to each artwork's context. In this way, a "third element," as Gramuglio calls it, appears as the most important factor that each chapter tries to expose and analyze. This could be phrased in the following question: How does a certain corporeal representation (the wounded body or the sick body, for example) function politically, beyond its particular contextual circumstances? This is not an easy question to answer, especially if we consider both literary and cinematic languages.

Although answering this question using cinema and literature as references seems to fit into Gramuglio's third problem (how to do comparative analysis without falling into the area of aesthetics?); it is not this dissertation's purpose to undertake such an approach. It also does not seek, as Gramuglio proposes, to measure the structural incidence of both artistic expressions on each other; i.e. it does not analyze the impact of cinematic language on literary code or viceversa. My aim is to observe in parallel how cinematic and literary works use their particular devices in order to make certain political statements through corporeal means. To be more specific, I have selected only narrative films and literary texts. Thus, by closely observing and comparing the use of narrative devices in film and literature, it is possible to analyze a certain structure, a certain form to construct and/or appeal to a corporeal dimension also inhabiting the artwork.

As we can see, analyzing the political implications of texture in certain artistic works entails entering into an obscure, not-completely-explored area. Methodologically, the range of challenges is vast and deep. But René Wellek, in the same lecture in 1958, provides some encouragement and seems to envisage Sedgwick's own epistemological proposal. He explains:

There is nothing presumptuous or arrogant in advocating a greater mobility and ideal universality in our studies. The whole conception of fenced-off reservations with signs of “no trespassing” must be distasteful to a free mind. It can arise only within the limits of the obsolete methodology preached and practiced by the standard theorists of comparative literature who assume that “facts” are to be discovered like nuggets of gold for which we can stake out prospectors’ claims. (291)

Wellek’s invitation for new horizons in comparative literature seems to echo in Marcel Detienne’s *Comparing the Incomparable* (2008), which became a useful theoretical tool for this dissertation. Detienne rejects the formula that “one can only compare that which is comparable” (ix) and conceives the comparativist’s job as an endeavor that invites one to coin new categories of common sense and comparabilities that are never immediate “givens” (xi). Detienne affirms: “With a contrastive approach, one can discover cognitive dissonances; or, to put that more simply, one may bring out some detail or feature that had escaped the notice of other interpreters and observers” (23). The idea of this dissertation is not to trace historical or geographical connections between Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland, but to observe their productions in their particular context during the same time period (end of twentieth century and beginning of twenty-first century) in order to contrast the analytical results. This becomes a challenge, since Detienne himself affirms: “Comparables cannot be constructed without experimentation” (xiv). Texture, then, could be considered something comparable for this dissertation; as Detienne explains, a comparable should not be too general or too specific to a particular culture in order to allow the beginnings of a comparison (25). He also adds that the comparatist approach could be shocking, especially when it coins a new term or concept. For Detienne, creating a new notion could open “a whole set of possibilities whose conceptual manipulation enables one to spot certain unique and essential elements organized into a variety of arrangements” (30). Detienne’s anthropological, philosophical, and historical approach presents a clear challenge. He affirms:

[T]he comparativist engages in a logical dismantling operation that makes it possible to discern how two or three elements interact and pick out microconfigurations that reveal differences that turn out to be interrelated even more subtly. The creative comparativist realizes that he or she is analyzing mechanisms of thought into patterns that become detectable when approached from a number of unobtrusive and by no means thematic angles. (30)

For Detienne, the creation of new mechanisms of thought becomes extremely important and comparativism, the main mode to shape such mechanisms. That is why he asserts, “Certainly, let us compare” (37). This is capital because a comparative approach sustains an important choice for Detienne, the choice that answers the question “what is the use of comparison?” He affirms that by working together and having a comparative interdisciplinary approach, it is possible “to construct comparables and analyze microsystems of thought that all stem from a single initial choice, a choice that we are free to set alongside other choices, those that are made by societies that, for the most part, have no knowledge of one another” (37).

The concept of texture appears as a challenge, which echoes in the very core of comparative literature as discipline. This dissertation aims to observe the creative possibilities of such a notion and its applicability in a various range of artworks. Wellek himself specified that once national vanities disappear and – I can add – theoretical and methodological risks are taken, “Literary scholarship becomes an act of the imagination, like art itself, and thus a preserver and creator of the highest values of mankind” (295).

### **Texture in Tension: Theoretical Challenges and Limitations**

The methodology is not the only challenge that Sedgwick’s concept of texture presents. There are indeed other limitations regarding the theoretical framework adopted by this dissertation that need to be addressed. Although Sedgwick’s proposals and objectives are considered in this dissertation, the “flaws” and constraints of her theory may also have an impact on the analysis of the different artworks.

In recent years the so-called “turn to affects” has appeared as the central focus in many fields of research. An abundant diversity has appeared due to the prompt adoption of these theories and use on literary or cinematic analysis. Sarah Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2004), Laura Podalsky’s *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2011), or Eugenia Brinkema’s *The Form of the Affects* (2014), are some examples. According to Leys, both Sedgwick and Brian Massumi (the two most important figures of the Affect Theory) possess a singular desire: “to contest a certain account of how, in their view, political argument and rationality have been thought to operate” (436). Their attention to affect (and texture, I could add) is rooted to the certainty that human beings are corporeal creatures, interconnected through emotional and sensitive means that transgress a verbal materiality. This definitely influences and conditions our political, social, and aesthetic conceptions.

As stated before, the priority for Sedgwick is to present a project based on a non-dualistic thought, a project that is able to explore what remains in the “beside.” Sedgwick conceives *Touching Feeling* as a proposal to “address aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do...” (6). Instead of trying to find a discursive evidence of a pre-conceived idea, Sedgwick proposes to leave aside an inquisitive reading on cultural production and focus more on the emotions/sensations/ideas that arise alongside verbal discursivity.

This becomes a tempting path for cultural research. Sedgwick not only criticizes a “dualistic thinking” that defines its intellectual structuration, but also the affective dimension of this kind of inquiry. She observes that “the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia”<sup>5</sup> (125), which

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to indicate the origin of the concept of “critical paranoia.” In 1972, Naomi Schor published the article “Dali’s Freud” in which she specifies the “paranoic-critical method” developed by Salvador Dali in his text

definitely leads to “negative” affects. For her, cultural criticism should take another direction, far from the dualistic thought and paranoia. As Hemmings points out,

Sedgwick believes that the central problem facing Theory today is its own critical paranoia, where the project of a poststructuralist critical imaginary has become reduced to the search for, and deadening (re)discovery of, prohibition everywhere: prohibition where it appeared there was freedom, prohibition in a space we had not, until now, thought to look. Sedgwick argues that such paranoia makes cultural investigation protectionist instead of expansive, as theorists ward off other critical imaginaries as duped unless they too come to the same conspiratorial conclusions, unless they too find violence where there had appeared to be possibility. (553)

These negative affects that arise due to this critical “attitude” regarding cultural research determine the whole conception of what and how to investigate, how to confront other theorists, and the “emotional” environment in the field. As Heather Love explains, for Sedgwick “paranoia works to anticipate and to ward off negative feeling, in particular ‘the negative feeling of humiliation’” (237). But Sedgwick also affirms that “paranoia” is “one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones” (128). One of them is a “reparative reading,” which centers its focus on affects, emotions, and texture. “[Sedgwick] advocates instead a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective, to the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community” (Hemmings 553). Affects and texture have the capacity not only to break the uninventiveness of cultural research, but also “to link us creatively to others” (Hemmings 553). To develop and encourage a reparative reading is Sedgwick’s objective.

In this dissertation I emphatically reaffirm the creative possibility of affects and texture and the communal potentiality of corporeal sensations, but the analysis of the different artworks remain

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“The Conquest of the Irrational.” As Schor states, for Dalí the paranoid-critical activity means “a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical-interpretative association of delusionary phenomena.” (122) Based on Freud’s idea of paranoia, Schor explains: “Perhaps paradoxically, paranoia-criticism’s roots in ‘the delusion of interpretation’ are what ensure its validity, for in Freud the status of delusion and the status of truth are always closely linked” (130). It is possible to connect Schor’s study to Sedgwick, if we observe how a sense of “truth” appears to be the result of paranoia. Heather Love explains: “paranoid reading is described as a way of disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth” (237).

far from making a “reparative reading.” Although one can affirm that observing and analyzing the political dimension of the body in artworks certainly opens up an alternative sort of discussion, the analysis displayed in this dissertation can be framed as part of a “critical paranoia.” Certainly, in order to make evident the political dimension of corporeality in the selected artworks, it is required a constant confrontation, comparison, dissection and reconstruction of the discursive and corporeal elements that inhabit the film or literary work.

Although it is considered Sedgwick’s theory as point of departure, in this dissertation I take a different approach. In this sense, it becomes important to acknowledge the series of limitations and unresolved contradictions connected to the very core of Sedgwick’s theory. Some of these limitations are addressed now in order to make clear the theoretical and methodological tensions that this dissertation experiences.

This research seeks to observe, analyze, and make evident the corporeal dimension that coexists alongside the verbal; and more particularly, to understand its political implications and trace connections between the different national traditions. It is not an objective to establish a “reparative reading.” The unveiling of the embodied political aspects in the selected artworks implies to dissect, compare, confront, and conclude with specific data. However, the body does not become a mere object of study. The analysis aims to make clear the communal and intersubjective dimension that accompany corporeality in artistic expression. But again the same challenge appears: How to proceed to this without applying dualistic thinking? Is it possible? How to argue without establishing an opposition or a cause-consequence reference, for example?

These questions can also be confronted to Sedgwick’s own ideas. Hemmings, for instance, argues that affects not only manifest as difference, but also as “central mechanism of social reproduction;” so they become “affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a

dominant social order” (551). It is possible to add that the body’s representations and corporeal sensations may also be effectively used to impose a dominant discourse. Although the artworks’ selected in this dissertation attempt to disrupt such discourse of power and ideology, one could argue that there are several examples in everyday life in which the body becomes a mere object of consumerism and a means for materialistic and capitalistic transactions.

However, Hemmings continues, both Sedgwick and Massumi do not dig deeper into this sort of “bad affect.” Although they acknowledge it, their work instead focuses on that “other affect,” the good affect that “undoes the bad.” Hemmings emphasizes that do not exploring into this “negative affect” leaves aside an entire area whose existence clearly undermines both Sedgwick and Massumi’s theories. Its existence reveals an opposition to what they present and clearly demonstrates again the return to a dualistic thinking:

It is difficult to maintain such an affective dichotomy of course, particularly in light of their own professed irritation with cultural theorists’ tendency to divide the world up into good and bad, repressive or subversive and so on [...]. But unfortunately neither author offers any explanation as to the relationship between these ‘two kinds’ of affect, which means the relationship remains dyadic (551).

Although this criticism may be considered valid, one can argue that it is possible to present ideas and political engagement through corporeal means that do not present themselves in a verbal way. In this sense, this dissertation seeks to revitalize the conception of the body and corporeal sensations in artworks as means to connect with others, to understand each other in other ways. Although it is possible to say that Sedgwick’s conceptions find themselves in a contradictory dead-end street, there are indeed other aspects that remain valid and useful. As Hemmings explains, “both Massumi and Sedgwick are advocating a new academic attitude rather than a new method, an attitude or faith in something other than the social and cultural, a faith in the wonders that might emerge if we were not so attached to pragmatic negativity.” (563)



As discussed before, the lack of a specific methodology does not prevent the possibility of constructing a comparable, as Detienne would affirm. This research adopts this “new academic attitude” in the sense that seeks for an alternative reading and analysis. But the reader may find a constant tension throughout the argumentation displayed in the chapters. It becomes a clear challenge to advocate for a reading that observes the corporeal dimension of artworks without utilizing confrontation, opposition, and cause-consequence methods to make such dimension evident. As Heather Love states, “practicing reparative reading means leaving the door open to paranoid reading” (239). How to argue without returning to a dualistic thinking? In this sense, it is not this dissertation’s purpose to make “texture” a formula, a trope, or a structure “attached,” “contained,” or “applied” in these artworks. This indeed would mean a reduction of Sedgwick’s entire discussion. The purpose is to indicate the existence of a non-verbal dimension that coexists in the artworks and that it is corporeally engaged to the politics of the context of production. As stated before, the following analysis and comparative confrontations may entail to be near the limits of what separates a reparative reading from a paranoid and suspicious inquiry.

### **Argentina, Cuba, Ireland, and the Transition to the Twenty-First Century**

One of the most important aspects that I encounter when comparing Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland<sup>6</sup> in the transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first, is that all of them experience in these years a sort of national reformulation and a deep transformation of their societal

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to point out that, although not highly considered in the dissertation, there are indeed direct historical factors that can make possible a connection between these countries. Argentina and Cuba share a common historical, linguistic, and historical aspects. However this may look obscure when connecting Argentina with Ireland, for example. It becomes important to consider then that Argentina became the first choice for many Irish immigrants during the nineteenth century. As Edmundo Murray explains, the need for rail workers and shepherds and the large amounts of Argentine propaganda used to recruit new people are some of the economic and political factors that mobilized Irish immigration (12). Currently, the presence of Irish descendants is noticeable. Several writers, such as María Elena Walsh, Rodolfo Walsh, or Sylvia Molloy, whose bilingualism and cultural connection to Ireland were never obliterated, have become important figures in Argentine literature. Moreover, current Argentine national government led by extreme-right president Mauricio Macri has distinct politicians and economists of Irish ascendancy, like the Minister of Finance Alfonso Prat-Gay.

structures. Different political and economic factors that marked important eras in these countries have a clear impact in the role of corporeality in the artworks selected. Since the analysis of most of works refer to these historical, political, and economic factors in relation to cultural transformations, it is important to note some general lines.

The 1980s and 1990s clearly marked in Latin America the entrance of neoliberal policies that later defined the economic and political course of the nations. Although widely applied, the term “Neoliberalism” becomes complex and even impossible to define. As Alberto Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston explain, “Neoliberalism straddles a wide range of social, political and economic phenomena at different levels of complexity” (1). However, David Harvey risks a definition that may help to observe more clearly the impact of these policies in many countries, and more particularly, Argentina and Ireland. As Harvey explains,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (2)

According to Harvey, from the 1970s there has been almost everywhere a turn to Neoliberalism, headed by figures such as Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in the UK, or Deng Xiaoping in China. For Harvey, the neoliberal state must “favour strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (64); and it must even use violent force to ensure and preserve such “freedoms” at all cost (64). Although the neoliberal state believes that these policies would eliminate poverty, its withdrawal of any intervention on society (welfare, healthcare, public education, etc.) exposes larger and larger segments of the population to impoverishment (76). Even though these aspects appear to be constant characteristics for governments in the era of Neoliberalism, Harvey highlights that in

practice it becomes hard to describe and define a singular kind of “neoliberal state.” He explains one of the reasons for this difficulty in the following manner:

[T]he evolutionary dynamic of neoliberalization has been such as to force adaptations that have varied greatly from place to place as well as over time. Any attempt to extract some composite picture of a typical neoliberal state from this unstable and volatile historical geography would seem to be a fool’s errand. (70)

Although it is possible to observe that both Argentina and Ireland strongly applied neoliberal policies during the 1990s, the configuration, consequences, and cultural impact of these differ. In Argentina, for example, the last military dictatorship (1976-1983) not only implemented violence, torture, a systematic genocide and abduction to discipline an entire population, but also to prepare the ground for the entrance of neoliberal policies in the country. As Maristella Svampa explains, a shift in the economic and social infrastructure started during the last Argentine military dictatorship; which can be also related to other similar repressive governments in Latin American history during the second half of the twentieth century:

Como en otros países de América Latina, el objetivo de la dictadura militar argentina fue llevar a cabo una política de represión, al tiempo que aspiraba a refundar las bases materiales de la sociedad. En consecuencia, el corte que introdujo fue doble: por un lado, mediante el terrorismo de Estado, apuntó al exterminio y disciplinamiento de vastos sectores sociales movilizados; por otro lado, puso en marcha un programa de restructuración económico-social que habría de producir hondas repercusiones en la estructura social y productiva. (22-23)

[Like in other Latin American countries, the objective of the Argentine military dictatorship was to carry out politics of repression, at the same time it aspired to relaunch the material basis of the society. In consequence, the introduced cut was double: on one hand, through State terrorism, it pointed at the extermination and discipline of vast mobilized social sectors; on the other hand, it set in motion a program of economic-political re-structuration that would produce deep repercussions in the social and productive structure.]

According to Svampa, the dictatorship introduced a re-structuration based on the importation of goods and capital that interrupted the national industrialization and internal production, which in turn promoted a strong indebtedness in both the public and private sectors.

Politics not only destroyed the basis of the possibility of a national coalition, but also established the precepts for the arrival of a dominant system controlled by some national economic groups, but mostly by international groups. The entrance of Neoliberalism is also related to a deep crisis of the national-popular model, whose major figure was Juan Domingo Perón. This model promoted: 1) the substitution of importations for the development of an internal market; 2) a strong role of the State as regulator and producer of social cohesion; and 3) a tendency to social homogeneity (Svampa 21). The structural crisis that this model embodied during Perón's last presidency came to its end during the beginning years of the last dictatorship.

Once the dictatorship ended, the return of the democracy with President Raúl Alfonsín (1983-1989) heralded a complicated time with a devastated economy and hyper-inflation. When a new crisis was perceived in the environment, new relationships (State-foreign companies) appeared in a moment in which the country needed a prompt solution (Svampa 31). The discourse of Neoliberalism found its place at this time, in a vulnerable country, and was accepted as the unique solution for all problems. Carlos Menem's presidency (1989-1999) promoted a new model for the country, based basically in liberal strategies that dismantled and delegitimized the previous model of populist national direction. All the power that the State used to have to control the market was completely abolished and the rules of the latter started to administer the future of the country. The State favored the dynamic market and liberalized the foreign investment in Argentina. This new model of "exclusive modernization," as Svampa names it, modified the insertion of the country in the world's economy: Argentina's economy became increasingly impoverished and the country became a land open to investments and importation, deeply affecting local industry (36). However, the privatizations of national industries that took place at this moment were not "free of corruption" at all. The association of democracy, a free market economy, and globalization did not

correspond with the communal benefits that the government announced. Only the Argentine elite benefited from the business deals that were established in these years. Menem promoted the purchase of historical Argentinian industries, such as YPF and Teléfonos. Clearly, the sale of YPF, the oil company, was a milestone in the success of Neoliberalism in the vulnerable country.

As Roberta Villalón expands,

In the short term Argentina witnessed economic growth, high investment rates, and monetary stability, but in the longer term it experienced severe impoverishment, unemployment, income polarization, recession, and, finally, monetary and financial instability that, combined with the rollback of the state, generated a growing heterogeneous mass of unemployed people without institutional protection from either the state, the unions, or other organizations (140).

This lack of sustainability and economic crisis reached a peak in December 2001 and ended up with massive protests, violent repression, several people wounded and some dead, and the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa. The analysis of several artworks in this dissertation are directly connected to this political and economic transformation. The cultural impact of these circumstances and the role of the body and corporeal sensations on artistic expression is more particularly explored in the following chapters. The analysis of artworks such as Colm Tóibín's *The Story of the Night* (1996), Santiago Loza and Iván Fund's film *Los labios* (2009), or Paula Markovitch's film *El premio* (2011), refer to these historical circumstances.

In the case of Ireland, the phenomenon of the “Celtic Tiger” actually refers to the gradual implementation of neoliberal policies and the deep impact that these had in Irish political, economic, and cultural configuration. During the 1990s and up to 2008, Ireland experienced a great economic growth. A series of factors (crisis of the religious institution, new era of peace with the IRA, integration to a globalized economy) determined the rapid implementation of neoliberal policies and the consequent “economic miracle.” But, as Maître and Whelan affirms, “the benefits

of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ are largely illusory and a focus on conventional economic indicators conceals a picture of increased inequality, erosion of employment security, and marginalization” (139-140).

The Celtic Tiger took place in two different stages, as Gerard McCann indicates: The first one from 1994 to 1999 and the second from 2001 to 2008. The first phase is characterized by an economy based on computers, chemicals and cola concentrates, or the “3 C’s” (112). McCann explains: “With its initial success it was accompanied by the arrival of a number of high profile American companies, sector leaders who carried with them the volume of good quality jobs that Ireland had historically found difficult to attract” (112). A second phase of the Celtic Tiger initiated when the economy shifts the focus to “financial services, construction, retail, property development and pharmaceuticals” (114). However, this prominent economic picture sank years later: “As anticipated, Ireland went into recession in September 2008 as the economy shrank for two consecutive quarters. Because of the design of the model and the nature of the system its economic breakdown was more severe and more rapid than any other European country [...]” (117). Certainly the depiction of the Celtic Tiger in cultural works changes: From a promising new era of Irish development that transforms national identity to an irresponsible and corrupt unequal system. As Timothy White affirms:

The recent economic downturn in Ireland has led many to question the validity of the Celtic Tiger experience, including serious interrogations of whether there was ever a “Tiger” in the first place; numerous commentators believe that the recession confirmed the insustainability of Irish prosperity based on dependence of foreign markets and capital (27).

The analysis of several artworks refer to the deep transformation of Irish culture due to multiple factors and most importantly to the Celtic Tiger. Peter Sheridan’s film *Borstal Boy* (2000), Colm Tóibín’s novel *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), or Peter Mullan’s film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) are some examples.

The situation in Cuba in these years also meant a deep transformation in the country's cultural, political, and economic structures. The "Special Period in Times of Peace" refers to an extended economic crisis endured in Cuba during the 1990s that began in 1989 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Cuban society struggled deeply due to the economic depression, which was severe in the early years. This Period changed completely the cultural and social dynamics in Cuban life, from food rationing to transportation. According to Ariana Hernandez-Reguant,

In the Special Period, there was a 'before,' which was stable, perhaps purer in its altruism and high ideals, a 'now,' which was confusing and unsettling, and a future that was, for many, another country. The experience was intense, yet the period was construed as a time of waiting; as an irresolute transition. (2)

During these years, Cuban government implemented new policies that initiated a new direction for their economic enterprise. The goals of several reforms were to insert Cuban economy into the world's market and stimulate the local production. The challenge was how to implement these modifications in Cuban regulations and policies without deeply transforming the ideological, social, political, and cultural structures. However, as Hernandez-Reguant affirms, this does not imply a "structural transformation of the socialist economy" since the reforms were designed only "to overcome the dire situation of the early 1990s without relinquishing political power" (7).

Cuban culture embraced the difficult situation and made creativity a clear way to deal with the crisis. Music, film, literature, and other artistic expression found a way to be extrapolated from Cuba to other parts of the world, and became more cosmopolitan and commercial. In this sense, Cuban imagery acquired a distinct value and meaning, like the visual representation of ruins:

Special Period Cuba acquired a distinct aesthetic quality, devoid of the moral judgments that invariably surrounded any reference to the Cuban Revolution. Thus images of ruin and decay and the music sounds of yesteryear were presented as signifiers of authenticity and resilience rather than as of socialism's failure. (Hernandez-Reguant 13)

As it is explored in this dissertation, certainly the image of ruins have a strong significance in the cultural production not only in Cuba but in other Latin American countries.

Although current situation differs from the years of the Special Period, Cuba still faces economic and political challenges<sup>7</sup>. Current cinematic and literary works observe with a mix of hope and resignation the development of Raúl Castro's government towards a changing era. The body appears in these years as a common factor, a common witness that processes in the skin the transformation of the society. From Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena* (1976) and Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* (1990) to Carlos Quintela's *La piscina* (2010) and Fernando Pérez's *La pared de las palabras* (2014), this dissertation offers a wide perspective that encompasses a progressive transformation in the cultural, political, and economic configuration of Cuban society. Although such chronological order is not considered, it is possible to observe in the analysis the transition and struggles that the Cuban government and its people endured in the hard years of the Special Period and the shift to the twenty-first century.

Although several differences can be traced between Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland during the period selected for this research, all of these countries experience a sort of deep structural transformation. Cultural representation makes the body an active agent that lives this changes and speaks from them. The body intervenes in artworks in various ways and always in contact with the contextual circumstances that define it. The body and corporeal sensations become a constant presence, although not verbally expressed. By considering the intersubjective corporeal dimension (the texture) of the artworks selected, it is possible to construct the body as a comparable. Despite cultural and political differences, the human body appears as an agent of political ideas that can be

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<sup>7</sup> Cft. Mesa Lago, Carmelo. "La economía de Cuba: Retos internos y externos".



used to contest and defy a certain discourse of power or represent a subjugated voice that can finally have the chance to speak out and loudly.

### **Forms of Corporeality: Structure, Chapters, and Selected Works**

As I have expressed before, a national or geographical logic has not determined the organization of this research. In fact, all chapters are organized around particular configurations of corporeality: in Chapter 1, the sick body; Chapter 2, desire and the aroused body; Chapter 3, pain and the wounded body; and in Chapter 4, limitations and scope of corporeal senses in cinema. In all of these chapters, Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland appear as contextual frames to consider the political implications of the body in each artwork. This has also permitted the visualization of clear formulas or modes in which the body politically engages with its context. Although each chapter could be read separately, all together they offer a more dynamic and broader conception of the possibilities of corporeality and its political engagement.

In Chapter 1 ["The Diseased (Social) Body: Illness, Ruins, and the Decaying Corporeal Dimension of Political and Economic Structures"], I compare the Irish writer Colm Tóibín's novels *The Story of the Night* (1996) and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999); a film directed by Santiago Loza and Iván Fund called *Los labios* (The Lips, 2009, Argentina); and the recent film directed by Fernando Pérez titled *La pared de las palabras* (The Wall of Words, Cuba, 2014). Although different medical conditions are portrayed, all of these works refer to disease and the decay of the human body. I present sickness as a means to refer to transformations in the social structure and economic paradigms that took place in Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland from the 1990s to the twenty-first century. In order to observe the political implications of the sick body, I apply a concept from Latin American Cultural Studies (the concept of "ruins") that appears strongly tied to the configuration of disease and decaying bodies.

In Chapter 2, ["Breaking Down Boundaries. (Homo)Eroticism and Sexual Desire as Political Armament"], I compare the film *Borstal Boy* (Peter Sheridan, 2000, Ireland); Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls, 1990, Cuba); and Marco Berger's film *Plan B* (Argentina, 2009). I analyze the political representation of (homosexual) desire and the aroused body in these works as a form to overcome boundaries imposed on subjects. I describe how national, cultural, and geographical borders and the heteronormative discourse are “overcome” in these films and literary work through male same-sex desire.

In Chapter 3 [“The Body in Pain, the Body as Weapon. State Apparatuses and the Representation of Pain and Torture.”], Louis Althusser and Giorgio Agamben’s study on Apparatuses provides a theoretical ground to observe how the body serves as a space of violent inscription by the State. The body appears wounded, tortured, denigrated. But in all of these works, pain and physical suffering become political weapons to fight back. I compare Néstor Perlongher’s short story “El informe Grossman” (Grossman’ Report, 1990, Argentina), Paula Markovitch's film *El premio* (The Prize, 2011, Argentina), Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalen Sisters*, (Ireland, 2002), and the Cuban film *La última cena* (The Last Supper, 1976) directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea.

Finally, in Chapter 4 ["Experiencing Film, Experiencing the Other. Bodily Senses and the Institutional Mode of Representation"], I compare three films: *La Ciénaga* (The Swamp, Lucrecia Martel, 2001, Argentina); *La piscina* (The Swimming Pool, Carlos Quintela, 2010, Cuba); and *The Last September* (Deborah Warner, 1999, UK-Ireland). In these films, visual perception becomes incapable of representing completely a sort of reality that requires other bodily senses to perceive (touch, hearing, and smell). These films differ from the ideological character of the supremacy of “vision” in mainstream cinema and intend to construct the body as an active device of perception and representation. They evoke a ‘Haptic Gaze’ – a term fully explored by Laura Marks in *The*

*Skin of the Film* (2000). As she explains, haptic images ask viewers to experience films through all senses: They require “the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well” (2). By comparing these films, corporeality appears as an aesthetic and ideological tool with which films contest the imposition of certain rules on cinematic language by the cultural industry – what Noel Burch calls the Institutional Mode of Representation.

## CHAPTER 1: THE DISEASED (SOCIAL) BODY. ILLNESS, RUINS, AND THE DECAYING CORPOREAL DIMENSION OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURES.

As she fought cancer, the American writer Susan Sontag was enraged by how the reputation of this disease made her and other fellow patients' suffering even worse. She recognized that some illnesses, such as TB, syphilis, cancer, and then AIDS, entail a series of meanings or become a myth that add extra pain for those living with them. According to Sontag, these "metaphoric trappings" have life threatening results: "The metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill" (*AIDS and Its Metaphors*, 14). People do not continue or search for treatment, do not put extra effort in finding competent medical services due to the inhibition caused by the disease's series of meanings. Cancer, Sontag explains, is represented as the disease of "the psychically defeated, the inexpressive, the repressed" (12).

Sontag's ideas capture the metaphoric authority of illnesses and sick bodies in the collective imagination, in which works of art also participate. Her essay was an exhortation also to revise the conditions in which sick bodies are portrayed in cultural production. In this sense, this chapter's main purpose is to explore and compare the representational and political value of the sick body as shown in two novels written by the Irish novelist and journalist Colm Tóibín (*The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship*); Santiago Loza and Iván Fund's Argentine film *Los labios* (*The Lips*); and Cuban filmmaker Fernando Pérez's *La pared de las palabras* (*The Wall of Words*). Although they show characters with different kinds of medical conditions (AIDS, pneumonia, malnutrition, fever, dehydration, dystonia), they all convey the idea of constructing sick bodies as highly allegorical elements that refer to a specific social framework. The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate the political dynamics behind the configuration of the sick body.

Illness in these artworks is not a static condition that haunts bodies. These are always in motion towards an inevitable decline. In fact, one can affirm that the sick body becomes an “organic allegory”: It is a living element that decays, that we encounter in the process of its own disappearance. It is an allegory that provides meanings while dying. In parallel of the development of the story, all of the characters’ sick bodies analyzed in this chapter portray the progression of a disease or a condition that will ultimately kill them. Illnesses do not remain as solely part of the intimate world of those who suffer. Herein lies the allegorical potential of the sick bodies: They connect the private suffering to a social framework to which they belong, referring to historical, economical, and political issues. The body of the patient can be observed as a social body. It is possible to establish these embodiments in parallel, which transforms the individual sick body into a terrain for the representation of the *maladies* that affect an entire society. Thus, in this chapter, the political aspect of texture appears in this parallel construction of meanings: The decaying body becomes a powerful tool to portray a more plural decline. What the dying body feels is an encapsulated notion of a communitarian suffering.

Another factor that we encounter as a common thread in the representation of illness and corporeality is its reference to the image of ruins. The sick body is a body in ruins. Ruins are a space of multiplies meanings, of reconstructing or re-writing past (hi)stories that still impact the present. As Diana Taylor explains, ruins are a space that we “inhabit” and where we re-create past experiences (Lazzara and Unruh 14). They become a palimpsest, a past-present space, re-read with another political and ideological perspective. Sick bodies, as well as ruins, become a space of encounter: Here one leaves the individual orbit to enter into a broader social and communal dimension.

In this chapter, I first analyze two novels by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín: *The Story of the Night* (1996) and *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999). Although they are set in different places at different times (Argentina in the 1980s and Ireland in the 1990s), both novels build their stories around a main character who lives with AIDS. In the case of *The Story of the Night*, Richard Garay, a young gay man who lives in Buenos Aires, becomes a first-hand witness to the last dictatorship (1976-1983), the return of democracy in 1983, and the corrupt privatization of most of the national companies. In fact, Garay was a participant in this set of neoliberal policies implemented as a result of economic mismanagement and external interests, mostly from the United States, with the support of the local political and economic elite. Garay works closely with Donald and Susan Ford, two Americans, possibly CIA agents, with connections in the American embassy and an important influence in the new Argentine political field. The drama of the novel centers on Garay's own discovery of his medical condition: After suffering a serious bout of pneumonia, he learns that he has AIDS. The novel subtly traces a parallel between Garay's health and the Argentine social sphere by the end of the 1980s, which marked the entire history of next decade. The 'invasion' of the external virus in his body seems to parallel the implementation of neoliberal policies in the weakened economic field in Argentina.

*The Blackwater Lightship* portrays a different kind of story. Here the main character is Helen, a successful school director who learns that her brother Declan has been suffering of AIDS for years. Since his health is highly compromised, he asks to be taken to their grandmother's house, the place of their childhood, a place he wants to spend some days after his release from the hospital. Helen, her mother, and grandmother, with two of Declan's friends, spend a few days together isolated from the rest of the world. Past and present family issues come up while Declan's body decays gradually. In this novel, Tóibín returns to Ireland, to his own hometown, and evokes in the

sick body another kind of allegory: Declan's body represents a deep shift in Irish society, that moves away from traditional religious morality and values into a modern and more cosmopolitan mentality. His medical condition serves as a battleground for the different generations' mindsets. It embodies a process that transformed Irish society during the 1990s. Tóibín's novels, in the end, embrace AIDS and the sick body as organic allegories that echo a broader social reality.

Secondly, in the case of the Argentine film *Los labios* (2009), sick bodies also re-present broader issues outside the individual dimension. Set in contemporary Argentina – in a small town called San Cristóbal, province of Santa Fe –, the film tells the story of three female medical workers who interview the population and gather information about their health conditions. These three women encounter a terrible situation: Not only is the hospital in ruins, but the entire population remains forgotten, uncared for, with their nutrition compromised. In the film, the directors Santiago Loza and Iván Fund use a permanent reference to the image of ruins: In fact, the women spend their nights in the abandoned hospital. Little by little, the women's own physical and emotional health declines. They develop fever, and they feel depressed, for example. Their health functions in the film as a representation of the population's medical conditions. The use of close-ups and a hand-held camera emphasize an affective purpose. The film is about and also becomes the encounter with others: It is a film of faces and sensations, of the decay of bodies that struggle with a compromised economic panorama of contemporary Argentina.

Finally, in this chapter I analyze the Cuban film *La pared de las palabras* (dir. Fernando Pérez, 2014), released during the 36<sup>th</sup> New Latin American Film Festival in Havana. In this film, Luis suffers from dystonia, a critical neurological movement disorder that creates muscle contractions, twisting, repetitive movements, and abnormal postures. His condition prevents him from communicating with others, which causes serious issues in his family. His mother, the main

character, does not only have to deal with her son's health but also with her other son's anger, her own mother's demand for a change, and the inability to continue working as a researcher in a laboratory. The situation worsens when Luis' health declines even more: A car accident seems to make his condition progress and become more serious. Just as in *Los labios*, Pérez's film utilizes the image of ruins: They appear not only as part of the scenario where the events take place (the family lives by the coast next to an abandoned building), but also as metaphors of the decay of the family ties (the film shows several ruins in Havana while Luis's grandmother can be heard reading an emotional letter in a voice over). The ruins then have multiple references: The family decay, Luis' body, and also, a subtle and ambivalent correspondence with the current condition of Cuban society. Like other films by Pérez, *La pared de las palabras* leaves the viewer with a sense of uneasiness regarding the social framework to which its characters belong. Issues like exile or dissatisfaction of a younger Cuban generation can be traced as some of the political components that float in the background.

Furthermore, the "wall" that prevents Luis from connecting with others can be overcome by emotions and sensations. Luis' brother, Ale, leaves one of his paintings in the mental health institution as a sort of therapeutic element: The patients feel "touched" by an artwork that shows a tempestuous sea (the material used for the painting is not only oil canvas, but also sharpened nails). Affects and sensations go through the wall of words and the sickness that gradually kills Luis.

By comparing these novels and films, one can affirm that the diseased and dying body becomes an allegory in motion. Its organic failure and decomposition make it a vivid and telling element that connects us with the social context from which the artwork comes. It is commonly said that health means the "silence of organs" with illness and pain being their voice when they



finally speak. The works analyzed in this chapter make use of that “corporeal voice” that, in one way or another, we all understand.

**The Political Embodiment of AIDS: Between Individual and Social Bodies in Colm Tóibín’s *The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship***

“[T]he body is ... a metaphor of society as a whole ...  
when national ... identities are threatened,  
there is likely to be a concern with the maintenance  
of existing bodily boundaries and the purity of bodies”  
C. Shilling, quoted by Patrick Hanafin

After the recognition gained with his previous novels (*The South* [1990] and *The Heather Blazing* [1992]), the writer Colm Tóibín explored what then (mid-1990s) was a growing trend in Irish narrative: A re-configuration of Irish traditional family and religious values in confrontation with (homo)sexuality. In fact, Tóibín came out as a gay man in 1993, the same year when homosexuality became decriminalized in Ireland and a few years before he published his first novel with a gay man as a leading character. Sexuality, tradition, family, and religion have always been important factors that characterize Tóibín’s writing. From his first novel (*The South*) to the latest published (*Nora Webster* [2014]), his stories inscribe deep concerns regarding the negotiations between the intimate and the communal, the past and the present, the bodily-driven desires and the mandate of tradition. Tóibín’s texts focus on the transition, reconciliation, and adaption of individuals and communities into new models of life.

His two novels *The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship* are highly eloquent, since they are not only the first two texts in which he portrays a gay male character, but also the first in which he discusses AIDS. There are different elements that can be seen as possible reasons to observe these common factors in these two novels. According to Wallace, the new political framework that Ireland faced during the 1990s, the “crossing of ideological boundaries”, made Irish writers “able to create imaginative spaces in which concepts of identity, community and

nationality can be explored and redefined” (257). As deeply explored in Chapter 2 with the analysis of Peter Sheridan’s film *Borstal Boy*, the image of the gay male became in this decade and later a sort of space to re-define Irishness. Novels that represent gay men also participate in the creation of new perspectives for Irish national identity. As Cronin explains,

[the] progressive changes in Irish society—the greater economic, social, and sexual freedom won by women since the 1970s and the visibility and political rights won by lesbian and gay rights campaigners in the 1990s—appear not as the achievements of social movements and political activism, but as issuing from the arrival, however delayed, of modernity (by which is meant liberal capitalism) in southern Ireland. (252)

Irish narrative also participates in the construction of a modern, more cosmopolitan, and more connected Ireland through the inclusion and active appearance of gay characters. Tóibín was one of those writers.

The decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 also contributed to the inclusion of gay male characters in Irish writing. The “gay community,” a “previously marginalized group”, was not a hidden existence anymore; and this brought a revision of “nation’s map” within Ireland. As Walshe points out, “this ‘revisioning’ is written into the pages of Irish fiction from the 1990s” (116). Tóibín was an active participant in this discussion. Trained as a journalist and, as he said, a “historian” (Luppino 467), Tóibín revisits past times in his novels: *The Story of the Night* is mostly set in the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina while *The Blackwater Lightship* takes place in 1993 Ireland (in the year of the decriminalization, six years before its publication). Tóibín’s work deals with history and collective memory, creating a tension between factual and fictional elements that is not easily solved in his novels. His revision of recent history in Argentina and Ireland works closely with both precise historical information and a memory “funded by tribal or familial interactions”. As Frawley highlights, “Tóibín does this to remind us that all narratives are constructs, and that acts of imagination inform history and memory” (71).

Another important aspect that these two novels share is the intense presence of AIDS as a medical condition endured by the main characters. Both texts are the only two among Tóibín's novels that explore the experience of learning about and living with AIDS so deeply. *The Blackwater Lightship* came out three years after *The Story of the Night*, which speaks about a moment of need for the writer to address this conflict, an interest that later disappeared. In these novels, AIDS would refer to a personal and a communal drama, an experience suffered by the individual and refracted to a familial and social framework. Illness and decay here speak of the transitional period taking place in Ireland during the 1990s, as if the gay male body were not only the representation for a new Irish modern identity, but also a dying body that refers to the death of the traditional Irish mindset. As Walshe explains, Tóibín is a writer "caught between two phases of cultural development" (130). This also supports Sontag's point when claiming that the body has always been the perfect allegory for the function and administration of a social structure (6).

In *The Story of the Night*, the action takes place in the 1980s in Buenos Aires, far from Tóibín's hometown. Richard Garay, the son of an English woman and an Argentine man, tells his story using a first person narrative voice. The novel recounts almost the entire life of the main character: From a complicated childhood where he faced the death of his father, and his mother's struggles to make ends meet, through his years at college, first jobs, and sexual encounters. He depicts in the background the years of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983), the Malvinas/Falkland Islands war, and the return to democracy with the elected president Raúl Alfonsín. Later, he befriends an American couple, Susan and Donald Ford, two CIA agents with connections to the American embassy. They actively participate in the political scene that would define who the next president of Argentina would be. Garay works for them as an interpreter and consultant. One of his most important jobs is to collaborate and assist a group of American

economists from the IMF who are interested in the series of privatizations that will take place. In fact, Garay witnesses and participates in the corrupt transactions in which state companies are sold to foreign investors. At the same time that the political and economic scenario is built, Garay speaks about his intimate life as a gay man: He visits the sauna, tells of his lovers and sexual encounters, and finally, describes his relationship with Pablo Canetto, the younger member of a bourgeois family. Once Garay seems to reach a general stability in his financial and emotional life, Pablo leaves him, and an intense chest pain and constant coughs send him to the hospital. Garay learns that he has contracted the HIV virus and that his immune system is compromised, which has allowed a serious pneumonia to develop. Completely shocked, Garay tries to return to his life knowing that no cure exists and that death is close. Finally, Garay meets Pablo in a doctor's office and finds out that he also has AIDS. The couple reunites and decides to face this new condition of their lives together.

The novel constructs two parallel narratives: The personal drama of the main character (the death of his parents, his sexual discoveries, his relationship with Pablo, and finally the first months of living with AIDS) and a political and economic transition (the dictatorship, the Falklands war, the return of democracy, the series of privatizations, and the election of Carlos Menem as new president in 1989). Although different, these two narrative lines do not stay separated: Garay, who tells the story from his own experience, functions as a pivot that connects both spheres of the intimate and the public. In fact, his body and its gradual decay become a sort of allegory that represents the destruction of the Argentine political and economic infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> Garay's sick

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible to trace other forms of parallelism, which would add more layers to this reading. Is it homosexuality also conceived as a pathology in the novel? Is it possible to affirm that the decay and destruction of the main character's body responds to an assimilation of a gay identity? If we confront *The Story of the Night* with *The Blackwater Lightship* in this sense, this may arise as a possible reading. In this section in particular, it is a different approach what defines their comparison. However, in this way, it is possible to observe the dynamics and possibilities offered by the sick body as an allegory.

body suggests a similar mechanism of decay that affects the country's "health": The invasion of an external virus (foreign interests and investors) that destroys from within (a series of privatizations with the support of a corrupt local elite) the totality of the body's wellbeing (the national industry and economic structure). One envisages the first symptoms of the inevitable end: The death of the body and the destruction of the economy, which ultimately led the country into a default and crisis in 2001. By embodying the implementation of neoliberal policies in the Argentine system in Garay, the novel makes a public tragedy part of the personal world, told in first person, felt in the character's own skin.

Tóibín's interest with Argentina came after his years as a journalist in Buenos Aires, following the trial of the military heads who were in charge during the dictatorship. The article that he wrote was compiled in the book *The Trial of the Generals: Selected Journalism 1980-1990*. Tóibín affirms that the novel came to him as a "confessional novel" that would crudely just tell the story from the first person (O'Toole 194). In his fictional book, Tóibín presents highly accurate research regarding the events that took place in the Argentina and neighboring countries during the 1980s in order to provide a strong and verisimilar scenario to the story: Torture and kidnappings of citizens by the dictatorial Argentine government (8), the World Cup in 1978, the fall of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 (161), Galtieri and the Falklands war in 1982 (68), the presence of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the first discussions about the *desaparecidos* (123), the inflation and economic crisis by the end of the 1980s, the description of national industries and the importance of the oil companies, the figure of Carlos Menem and the conservative wing of Peronism, etc. What the book draws is the insertion of Neoliberalism in Argentina, which defined its history during the entire decade of the 1990s.

Tóibín portrays this historical scenario throughout the entire novel. By becoming an ally of Donald and Susan Ford, Garay witnesses different meetings of the elite that later decide their presidential candidate. He was fascinated by the Fords' power and influence:

I still believe that they were involved in every cent which the United States put into the campaign for the election of Carlos Menem and maybe other candidates. I do not know [...] how much real power they had. But they could make decisions, I was sure, without consulting anybody. I never once underestimated them. [...] I was excited by them, by the idea that they had a hidden agenda here, by the idea that they were outsiders. (83)

Garay's close collaboration with the Fords is also tied to his participation in the corrupt transactions of companies such as YPF. Once Garay becomes an important independent consultant with his own office, he receives a visit from one of the State agents involved in YPF privatization. He asks Garay to apply for a contract in which Garay himself would claim to provide a service never given and then receive a share of an expensive check (155). Garay agrees to go ahead (175) although later he seems to regret it:

When the second half of the money arrived, I became worried. I felt that I had lost my nerve. I had visions of us being caught, our photographs in the newspapers as we were led away. Signing the contract and getting paid seemed easy to live with, but taking money for services never provided was something else (186).

Both Garay's deep connection with the Fords and his participation in the corrupt privatizations make him one of the protagonists in the transition into a new political structure in Argentina. This is one of the "stories of the night", of darkness that he experiences. Like the Fords, Garay keeps silent about the manipulation of power and the perverse interests of the globalized market in running the country. However, as Kim Wallace explains, this attitude does not prevent Garay from living in the flesh the destruction of the national structure to which he has contributed. The novel suggests that Garay retreats from understanding or communicating, he keeps silent. But "the suppression of the political narrative does not free the individual from the impact of political

forces” (266). Indeed, the political and economic aspects of the novel are developed alongside a corporeal dimension: Garay’s discovering of his medical condition is the other “story of the night”.

Although sickness and pain appear mostly in the second half of the novel, corporeality has always been there in different manners. From the beginning, Garay’s (homo)erotic desire and first sexual encounters are clearly exposed: His interest in his father’s body (16), his encounters with his cousin’s friends in La Pampa (25), and his first visits to the gay sauna (66). But corporeality also appears in other ways: Torture and pain (the experience of the Chilean refugees in Barcelona) (51), the visualization of his parents’ corpses rotting in their coffins (30; 63), a homoerotic display of domination by Donald in the lockers (137), and his attempt to sleep with Susan (160). Embodiment is everywhere at every moment. Sexual desire, pain, and finally disease are constant references made by the narrative voice. Garay becomes aware of the corporeal presence of others and its impact on his own, as if the story were told also through his body.

When AIDS first appears in the novel, it seems to be something occurring far from Garay’s reality: Something heard, read in an American newspaper (197). But later it becomes more “real” when Pablo’s friends, both living with AIDS, visit Buenos Aires. One of them, Mart, has his immune system completely destroyed. Garay encounters for the first time what it means living with AIDS: The medication, the constant doctors’ check-ups, the vulnerability of the body to opportunistic infections, etc. He also learns of the catastrophe that it has caused to the gay community in San Francisco, the city from where Pablo’s friends come. Later, Garay listens to Pablo telling his personal story with Frank, his partner at the time when he lived in San Francisco. Frank died soon after learning of his condition (250). After Pablo’s friends leave, Garay focuses again on the contracts and the support for Menem’s election. After learning that Mart has died, Pablo travels to California to attend the funeral while Garay stays to work. Some days after he tries

to contact Pablo, but he has disappeared. Garay later finds out that Pablo has returned to Argentina and does not want to talk to him. The relationship is over. Garay spontaneously travels to New York to spend some days with a colleague and lover when his first symptoms appear. He feels great difficulty breathing, a sharp pain in his back; and he coughs terribly. He decides to return to Buenos Aires as his condition worsens. These are some of the symptoms he experiences:

Each time I coughed I felt a sharp pain in my back. I felt hot and sweaty. I lay there trying to stop but I had no control over my breathing. [...] I felt a burning in my lungs. (286)

My skin was on fire and I had a terrible thirst. [...] I braced myself each time, I knew how sharp the pain was going to be, as though my lungs were going to explode. [...] Every bone in my body was sore, and I felt that I was not going to be able to continue breathing. (288)

The detailed description of these symptoms represents an attempt to portray an intimate corporeal experience from the first person perspective. Once Garay arrives in Buenos Aires, he goes to the hospital where a group of nurses and doctors take care of him. Garay has a severe pneumonia. They run tests and discover he is HIV positive. Garay's quick corporeal decay developed in few pages are later emphasized in the visualization of his own death:

I lay back thinking that this would be the end, then, that my body would be covered in a sheet and pushed on a trolley to the morgue, that before then I would spend weeks, maybe months, languishing here or at home, becoming thinner and weaker, waiting for the long ordeal that would result in being alive one minute, alert, with a full memory, and the next minute dead, everything gone. (294-295)

Although now being HIV positive does not mean a death sentence, Tóibín's purpose in this novel and *The Blackwater Lightship* was to explore the feelings of those who in the 1990s learnt that they were infected (Wiesenfarth 7). Present throughout the novel, corporeality encompasses the totality of the narration. Menem, the privatizations, the Fords, and all the political elements that covered Garay's life become unimportant. The narrative focuses now on Garay's decaying body.

The deterioration of both the country's infrastructure and Garay's body advance together. As other critics have pointed out, although not sufficiently (Caserio 2006, Naughton 2010), one



can trace a parallel development between the individual organism and the social body. The novel suggests that Garay's corporeal suffering becomes an allegorical result of the process taking place in the country's economy and political infrastructure. The advancement of foreign investors' interest and the destruction of the public "immune system" work with the same mechanism as the virus that has invaded Garay's body: Entering from the outside, destroying from within, and making vulnerable the entire body-nation. The sick body functions as an organic representation of a broader decay: As if the latter could also be felt in the flesh, experienced from the inside. By making it part of the body, in a way, it becomes closer, nearer to a personal experience, more real. In the end, this sort of parallelism also creates a sense of awareness, since the individual corporeality seems to be as vulnerable as the entire social framework.

When Tóibín was asked in an interview about the strong connections between *The Story of the Night* and his next novel *The Blackwater Lightship*, the interviewer also pointed out that beyond their similarities in the theme that they explore, they work from different perspectives. In fact, they are stylistically different. Tóibín responds that although he tried to avoid writing *The Blackwater Lightship*, he could not help it. He even adds that in the second novel (something we could also perceive in the *The Story of the Night*) nationality is inscribed in the characters themselves: "[M]emory is a thing they saw on television, or what they remembered about their children, and that there's no nation in the book, except that the characters are the nation!" (O'Toole 195).

Like Richard Garay, Declan in *The Blackwater Lightship* seems to concentrate a deep allegorical reference to a different sort of process that was taking place in Ireland during the 1990s. Unlike the previous novel, here history remains circumscribed to the familial sphere. What seems to emerge as main concern is another sort of transition: The passage from a traditional familial

mentality tied to religious morality to a conception of modernity as a result of a more cosmopolitan and economically growing nation.

*The Blackwater Lightship* is mainly set in Tóibín's own hometown, Wexford, far from the capital city. After learning that her brother has been dealing with AIDS for several years, Helen decides to comply with his wishes to stay with his grandmother in her house near the cliffs in Wexford after he leaves the hospital. Declan also asks Helen to tell their mother, Lily, about his condition. Declan's wishes awaken past family issues since they reencounter and spend days all together at the grandmother's house. Helen has completely disconnected herself and her family from her mother and grandmother, due to past misunderstandings and resentments, but Declan's situation forces them to stay together and face each other. The three of them, each one representing different generations of Irish women, endure not only their own issues but also the fact that Declan has practically excluded them from his life. Like his female relatives, Paul and Larry, two of Declan's gay friends, also join him in his return to the familial house. They demonstrate a deeper knowledge of the disease and Declan's life itself. After some days of tension, Helen revisits her memories of her childhood. She remembers her father alone and sick in the city's hospital while their mother decides to prevent them from seeing their dying dad. Helen confronts Lily, who is also hurt by her daughter's continuous exclusion of her (both the mother and grandmother were not invited to Helen's wedding and have barely seen her children). Gradually Declan's condition worsens, and he has to be taken back to the hospital. On their way there, Helen and Lily seem to find a starting point for reconciliation. Declan's body will soon disappear, but some hope remains in the mother-daughter relationship.

Similar to Richard Garay's corporeal condition, Declan's decaying body makes a reference to a broader social shift taking place in Ireland. He embodies the painful transition from a

traditional isolated Catholic nation into a European, economically promising, and cosmopolitan country. According to Ryan, the fact that all these gay characters visit the Wexford coast far from the capital city Dublin entails a project of “textual reterritorialization” which creates a tension between tradition and modernity. Both Declan’s “families” (Paul and Larry on one side, Helen, Lily, and his grandmother on the other) live together: “a reformation of the family around homosexual relationships is not represented here as outside the moral frame of Catholicism” (28). Rather than clashing or superseding, Ryan highlights that “tradition” and “modernity” intersect. But this is not an easy achievement in the novel. The characters develop a deeper understanding and trust as Declan’s body worsens

From the beginning the two groups differentiate themselves. Declan’s female relatives belong to a more local, rural world, tied to traditional family compositions. For example, Helen is a school director with a husband and two children, Lily is a successful sales agent in a local company who never married again after her husband’s death, and the grandmother lives peacefully by the Irish coast in a small town. On the other hand, Declan’s best friends are part of a new phase of Irish society, which allows gay men to have an honest lifestyle in accordance with their sexuality inside and outside of Ireland (Paul has a long-term relationship with a French man and lives in Belgium; Larry is a successful interior decorator). As many critics pointed out (Böss 2005, Carregal-Romero 2012, Cronin 2004, Persson 2007, Walshe 2008), the encounter of these two groups of people supports the reading of the novel as depicting the shift taking place in 1990s Ireland.

There are other important details that reveal the novel’s configuration of the changing environment in Irish morality and mentality. When talking to Declan’s sister and grandmother, Larry tells about his close participation in the activist fight for equal rights:

I was involved in a gay group in Dublin, and we organised fund-raising and we started news sheet, and we had meetings all the time. I helped out a bit, and I was around a lot, so the time Mary Robinson invited gay men and lesbians to Áras an Uachtaráin, I was on the list and I couldn't say no. (144)

Larry refers here to the president Mary Robinson's (1990-1997) well-known invitation of G.L.E.N. (the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network), an organization that fights for equal rights. In fact, the decriminalization of homosexuality took place during Robinson's presidency. Popular for her inclusion of marginalized groups and communities, Robinson's term opened up the door for the discussion of inclusion of minorities and the criticism of some of the Catholic Church's political stances.

While Larry's story refers to the political background happening in Ireland, Paul speaks from another sort of experience. His long-term relationship with François made him discover how more "open-minded" families from continental Europe deal with homosexuality, something that seemed still not possible in Ireland.

When we got together, [...] François' parents were just unbelievable. They bought a big double bed for us and put it in François' room. I don't think he had a single moment's problem with them about being gay. We saw them often. We usually stayed with them on a Saturday night, or saw them on Sunday. They were our best friends. (168)

Paul's story contrasts with Declan's own relationship with his family. The contrast that Paul's experience creates contributes to the challenge of Irish traditional views on sexual and emotional relationships. He even tells the story of a priest from Brussels who agrees to marry Paul and François in a secretive ceremony, something questioned by all the Irish people with whom he has shared the story (176). The priest even says: "Welcome to the Catholic Church" (173). Helen cannot help questioning the validity of such a ceremony since the Vatican would not allow it. Paul responds: "That's why I left this country, remarks like that. French people, even Belgian people, never talk like that" (176). The different conceptions on family and religion clash as part of a painful process of adaption.

At the same time, Declan's body rapidly deteriorates. Helen, from whose perspective the story is told, observes with astonishment the decay of his brother: "When Helen looked at Declan in this light, she saw for the first time how sick he was, how tight and drawn the skin on his face was, how tired his eyes seemed, and how shrunken his whole body had become" (108). After losing the sight in one eye (200), Declan's state worsens more. Vomiting and diarrhea are the first symptoms (221) which soon turned into strong and painful abdominal spasms:

In the hour after midnight, Declan's stomach cramps began again. He had been sweating heavily; Helen and her mother were sitting by his bed, her mother holding a towel to wipe his brow. He had been still for a while, with his eyes open, and light coming from a covered lamp in the corner. Suddenly, he started to heave; he sat up and held his stomach, pressing hard as though to prevent the cramp coming, and then moaning under his breath in small fits and starts until it died down. (256)

Although the story does not cover Declan's death, his imminent end seems quite close. Unlike *The Story of the Night* where AIDS and the decaying body function as a parallel representation of the societal structure, Declan's suffering implies the decay of a traditional mindset and conception of family, or rather, a process of adaptation into a new mentality. This aspect has been traced by different critics (Carregal-Romero 2012, Frawley 2006, Persson 2007, Ryan 2008, Yebra 2014). Among them, Yebra provides an interesting reading: He points out that Declan's sick body functions as a sort of "Christian sacrifice," witnessed and also closely suffered by the mother and the sister, who would resemble the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Yebra's reading actually emphasizes Tóibín's interest in Irish Catholicism, a theme examined in several of his non-fiction books and recently the novella *The Testament of Mary* (2012). Yebra explains: "Declan [...] fulfils a Messianic role that Irish culture allegedly needs to confront traumatic changes. Catholic sacrifice, pain, and suffering are here re-defined in the form of AIDS or gay ostracism." (98)

He also adds that Declan's body functions as an allegory of sin and punishment; and thus his corporeality could be read as "the site of Irish Catholic morality and repression, as the casualty of the Irish modernization process" (99). In fact, Tóibín himself indicates that in his novels he enacts "a forgiveness, a sort of cleansing and reconciliation, even a sort of redemption, and that the novels mimic elements of the New Testament story" (Dillon 26). Hence, rather than a representation or organic reflection of a social decay, the sick body in *The Blackwater Lightship* becomes a recipient of social changes that must be sacrificed, given away for the benefit of everybody. What Yebra's reading points out above all is that the sick body becomes a space of struggle for social processes. These painful transitions may not be completely embraced in a verbal dimension, but they are highly inscribed, understood, and felt in the flesh.

Not only are gay male characters or AIDS the common elements in these two novels written by Colm Tóibín, but they are also a mechanism for illness and embodiment to reveal deeper societal, political, and economic shifts. Although set in two different contexts, it is possible to trace some correspondences between Argentina and Ireland at this point in their history. As Wallace explains: "Argentina seems analogous to Ireland with its sense of displacement when faced with the violence of its colonial/postcolonial past and the resurgence of violent conflict in the North" (265). The effects of a violent past and their transition into a new status happen through the body, as a sort of sublimation. The ulterior effect of these narratives is to make a political and ideological process something perceivable in the skin, suffered inside the body, in a way perhaps better expressed than in the finite and incomplete meaning of words.

### **The Camera's Sickness: Ruins and Corporeality in Santiago Loza and Iván Fund's film *Los labios***

The neoliberal policies applied in Argentina during the 1990s had as a consequence a deep social fragmentation that ended up leaving vast sectors of society completely isolated. Loza and

Fund's film depicts the result of these economic policies and confronts through cinematographic language the reality of a forgotten Other. *Los labios* (2010) tells the story of three female medical workers who travel to San Cristóbal, a small town in the province of Santa Fe, to interview people and gather information regarding their health conditions and general health. They discover that most of the inhabitants suffer from malnutrition and dehydration, and have little medical attention. The movie shows these three characters, played by professional actresses, wandering around the town and talking to people, all real members of the community without any acting experience. The film presents a constant oscillation between documentary and fiction, without creating any disruptions in the narrative flow. It is a "semi-documentary", as its directors call it. Throughout the movie, the women gradually become part of the community by interacting with its members at different places of social encounter. But this gradual integration makes the main characters "embody" the decay that all San Cristóbal's inhabitants experience: The women get sick, depressed, feel suffocated, and can barely continue with their work. However, by the end of the film they are able to regain strength and make possible a deeper and more human connection with the people of the town. The film does not show any major discoveries or provoke any tough criticism, but produces a celebration of life above all.

The use of the hand-held camera and constant close-ups become tools that construct an intimate view of the gradual process of "contagion" and "decay" that affects the main characters. The sick body, then, appears in the film in two ways: as part of the information gathered during the interviews (something that could be discussed in the encounter with the community) and represented through the cinematic code (the close-ups and hand-held camera that represent the affective and physical impact on the medical workers). Corporeality imprints the cinematographic technique, which indicates that the medical condition of the community goes beyond a series of

numbers or estimations; it is the corporeal registration of a decay discussed in the interviews and felt by the medical workers and the camera.

Another of the representational metaphors implemented by the film is the image of ruins. While interviewing people and discovering their sanitary issues, the medical workers enter a place full of ruins: Most of the buildings, especially the abandoned hospital where they spend their nights, are almost entirely destroyed. In the Latin American context, the image of ruins has been used in different rhetorical and epistemological ways. As Lazzara and Unruh explain, “recognizing ruins as powerful generators of critical-theoretical reflection, major twentieth-century thinkers conceived activity around ruins as a metaphor for intellectual inquiry itself” (2). If one expands the concept of ruins, the result would comprise not only architectural remains, but also unfortunate remains of sociocultural and political models: Machu Picchu could be seen as the ruins of the Inca Empire just like the “villas miseria” in the outskirts of Buenos Aires become the ruins of an entire neoliberal era in Argentina society.

However, it is important to observe that “ruins are dynamic sites shot through with competing cultural narratives, palimpsests on which memories and histories are fashioned and refashioned” (Lazzara and Unruh 3). Taylor explains that entering ruins implies much more than a simple and plain contemplation. Entering the ruins means to put into play the body, to make it interact with its surroundings – to carry out a performance. After visiting a detention center utilized during the Chilean dictatorship, Taylor explains:

The physical remains provide the scenarios that invite visitors to envision the lives that others lived within them. All objects reference behaviors. Each object we see was made, or positioned, with a certain use in mind. We populate the space with peoples and actions as we reenact past practices, conscious that others climbed these stairs and sat where we are now sitting. Walking the ruins is a durational performance; *presenciamos y damos cuerpo* (we experience, ‘being present’ and ‘lending our bodies’) as we repeat the acts suggested by the scenario. (14)



As Taylor explains, the ruins make themselves a space that we “inhabit”, where one puts the body into play above all, and this is how we re-produce and re-create a certain significant experience, read now from a different time and political perspective. In this sense, *Los labios* is the product of entering ruins and of “inhabiting” the remains of an economic model that yielded as its result a dysfunctional social framework represented by the population’s health and the hospital’s building condition where the characters stay (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figures 4 and 5: Inhabiting the ruins in the film *Los labios*.

When the three women arrive in San Cristóbal, a State agent takes them to an abandoned hospital that, according to him, has been “prepared for them”. Once they enter, the camera focuses on their reactions when they realize there are still many things to arrange: They have to clean, mop, take the trash out, and organize the furniture. From the beginning, the camera anticipates that these women will encounter a community in decay by showing this ruined space. “Inhabiting” the ruins starts from the first scene. Later, the camera also shows a group of municipal workers who demolish some areas of the hospital, which increases the sense of deterioration perceived in the totality of the social structure.

This place, being a public and state-run space, becomes a sort of materialization of a broader decay, a condition reflected in the population and in the state intervention. The hospital itself constitutes a physical space in the film through which the characters in-*corpo*-rate, *hacen cuerpo*, the sociopolitical conditions that they have encountered.

San Cristóbal was chosen as the place to make the film not only because of Fund's own personal connection – his childhood's town–, but also for its capacity to become a small universe that encapsulates a broader reality (see Figure 6). In an interview, Loza, explaining his political conception of cinema, highlights this point:



Figure 6: Demolishing the hospital.

mi mirada o mi forma de convivencia política en el cine tiene que ver con hablar y poder acercarme a micromundos, a pequeños universos desde los cuales puedo pensar. [...] siento que en ciertos organismos pequeños que son estos relatos yo puedo retener ciertas heridas sociales. (Ipaguirre 111)

[my gaze or my form of political coexistence in cinema deals with talking and being able to get closer to micro-worlds, to small universes from which I can think. [...] I feel that in certain little organisms that these tales are I can retain some social wounds.]

In fact, the main challenge for the directors was to make the professional actresses interact with the real residents of the community. It is a *film de cruces*, a “film of crossings” that operates between the documentary and the fictional registers. As the directors explain, they were interested in maintaining a *plano vivo*, a living-shot, meaning that both registers would not collapse and would allow people to refer and talk about themselves freely. In this sense, the interviewer-interviewee format was the most useful. One can notice the actresses’ improvisation and the spontaneity of the local participants.

Poverty and unemployment become the common factors in all of the interviews that give a sort of naturalization to an impoverished medical condition. First, the medical workers visit a mother with eight children, who lives in poverty and with no job security. Later, they talk to an unemployed man with health problems, a father raising two girls (one with a breathing condition). They also organize group discussions in which women from the community talk about issues with hygiene and nutrition. Later, they find an old man alone in his house, dehydrated and incapable of walking. They take him to the hospital. They also interview a young woman, who affirms that she is pregnant and who has not received medical attention. She also talks about a miscarriage that she suffered in the past.

In all of these interviews, the sanitary conditions become subjects of discussion. There are no visual references to sick bodies, but they appear only through words. However, as expressed before, the population's sanitary conditions seem gradually to affect the workers' own health. This provokes a growing sense of closeness between the main characters and the residents of San Cristóbal. The film depicts them as peers, as equals, not as objects of study or analysis. As Loza himself explains: "For me, politics consists in how one approaches the subject that one films" (Ipaguirre 110, my translation). Indeed, there is a sense of political awareness in the way the camera confronts its people, an ethical consciousness inscribed with the respect in which the narrative code collides with reality. One could perceive a sense of solemnity in the encounter between the fictional characters and the local participants during the interviews. The most telling aspect of such encounters is that they corporeally affect the fictional world, the characters' health, as if the mode in which one could connect with the other is through the body and emotions.

In this sense, the film does not have the purpose to visually show bodies' suffering. There are no direct shots of famished bodies or open wounds or infections. The only scene that can be a

sort of exception takes place when the women help an old man suffering from dehydration to go to the hospital. Then, the representation of disease in *Los labios* is critical to understanding the film's political position. As Cartwright explains, one can trace cinema's historical relation with medical sciences through its techniques. Cartwright exposes how medicine has utilized the technological development of cinema to support its control, discipline, and construction of the human body (4). She affirms: "the scientific analyses of living bodies conducted in laboratories of medicine and science were in fact based in a tradition that broke with the photographic and theatrical conventions that would inform both the documentary and the narrative cinema." (2) She also adds:

[T]he cinematic apparatus can be considered as a cultural technology for the discipline and management of the human body, and that the long history of bodily analysis and surveillance in medicine and science is critically tied to the history of the development of the cinema as a popular cultural institution and a technological apparatus. (3)

Cartwright shows as examples some films made at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which there was a strong interest to record natural processes visually: Torture and death of animals or individuals, a heart beating, epilepsy, blood running through the body, etc. Although these were well known processes, there was no existing material that would allow for the careful study of them, such as calculating times and other scales. In this sense, by applying a "visual mandate" when registering illness and sick bodies, the cinematic technique would be working alongside a medical and scientific purpose.

By referring to illness and corporeal decay, Loza and Fund's film confronts an entire history that connects cinema with medicine and science. Evidently, *Los labios* remains far from other films in which the sick body appears as the visual center of the image: British filmmaker Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), for example, shows in detail open ulcers on famished bodies. Loza and Fund's work utilizes a completely different register. Since illness is not visible, the film

deploys two constant techniques with which to construct a corporeal and non-visual dimension that appeals to the sensation of sickness and physical decay. These two techniques or formal elements are the use of the close-ups and the hand-held camera.

Close-ups are a constant in both interviews and fictional scenes. When referring to affects and the affection-image, which would be equal to close-ups and faces in cinema, Gilles Deleuze affirms that this is “a coincidence of subject and object, or the way in which the subject perceives itself, or rather experiences itself or feels itself ‘from the inside’” (65, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*). According to Deleuze, this process becomes inscribed in faces, which are equal to close-ups: “The affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face.” (87) For Deleuze, each time we encounter an element that reflects intensity (emotions) by little movements, we are in the presence of an affective element. In this sense, Deleuze gives priority to the face as an essential element in the affection-image; it is the part of the body that is able to produce affect through its movement; it is a recipient and producer of emotions, of meaningful micro-moves that become greater when they are framed and emphasized by the close-up. As Deleuze explains: “Le visage est cette plaque nerveuse porte-organes qui a sacrifié l’essentiel de sa mobilité globale, et qui recueille ou exprime à l’air libre toutes sortes de petits mouvements locaux que le reste du corps tient d’ordinaire enfouis” (126). [The face is this organ-carrying plate of nerves which has sacrificed most of its global mobility and which gathers or expresses in a free way all kinds of tiny local movements, which the rest of the body usually keeps hidden (87-88).]

Affection results from the mode in which the movement-image establishes a connection with the subject by appealing to emotions. The close-up becomes then an “agenciamiento emocional” [emotional agency] (Fernández Gonzalo 2). A close-up removes the face from space, transforms the surrounding into an abstract space, and puts emotion in the forefront. Films such as

*Faces* (1968) by John Cassavettes or *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927) by Carl Dreyer use close-ups of the face to express living emotions. The use of the close-up then materializes the affective mode of the movement-image, establishing an emotional connection between the image and the spectator (See Figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8: Interviewing local people in San Cristóbal.

The concept of affection-image explained by Deleuze serves to highlight an important aspect of *Los labios*, since one can observe its constant use of close-ups. From the beginning, Loza and Fund's camera follow the three women in the bus, arriving in San Cristóbal, cleaning the abandoned hospital and carrying out the interviews, mostly framing their faces. In different shots (when they travel in a car back seat, sit to eat or drink, or talk to the locals), the camera focuses on their facial reactions. The film does not show them having long conversations. Their conclusions and evaluations remain implicit in the way they act and react. However, the impact of what they encounter appears through their corporeal and emotional reactions: They become tired and sick; they suffer from dizziness, insomnia, and fever; they vomit or feel suffocated; they become depressed. By applying a constant use of close-ups, the film creates a sense of affective and physical connection between the three medical workers and the population of San Cristóbal. *Los labios* is a film of faces, of pure affect.

The hand-held camera is also a technique that correlates with close-ups. During interviews and fictional scenes, the camera is never on a tripod and shows a slight trembling in the frame.

This reveals the presence of a living entity. This technique makes visible what Deleuze calls the “semisubjective” gaze: A camera that is not subjective because it does not register the gaze of a character, nor an omniscient being, but rather a present entity that is there but cannot be seen, whose presence is inevitable. It is an *être-avec*, “being-with”, as Deleuze explains; this is the cinematographic camera’s condition (111). The hand-held camera also contributes to the creation of affective spaces, where the connection between the spectator and the characters equals the one between the interviewers and the interviewees in the film. The hand-held camera indicates the liveliness of the image and the corporeal presence of a living entity.

Luchi, the youngest of the three women, seems to be the one without much experience. She struggles more than the others during the film. She cannot sleep, she cries after taking the old man to the hospital, and she becomes depressed. By the end of the movie, the three women go out to celebrate the oldest of the medical workers’ birthday, Coca. They meet a group of men, and they talk to each other and dance. Luchi remains sitting, feeling dizzy and depressed. The camera frames her face with little light. This image registers her discomfort. In another scene, when returning from an excursion, another of the medical workers says that she does not feel well, that she feels suffocated. Later, she suffers from a serious fever. The camera also gets closer to capture her sensations. These sorts of scenes reveal that the close-up as well as the hand-held camera are techniques that enhance the perception of corporeal contact (see Figures 9 and 10).



Figures 9 and 10: The camera is sick.

As Roger Koza affirms, Loza and Fund seem to have found the secret that balances their own conceptions of cinema. On one hand, “Fund’s conception in which the camera is the extension of his arm [which] implies a constant impulse to ‘touch’ the otherness”. On the other hand, there is an insistence in Loza’s filmography to represent “scarcity as a universal condition of the spirit: Everybody needs an Other” (my translation). Indeed, *Los labios* is a film about the otherness and the corporeality of others, about how to enter the world of the other through the body – maybe a more reliable and real dimension.

The ruins of the film also represent the results of neoliberal policies and the recent economic crisis. This is something that must be inferred, since the film does not introduce direct criticism or statements in this regard. However, the film becomes highly political in the form in which it registers ruins.

*Los labios* captures the physical rubble of the hospital and the residents’ ruined condition through a dignified and engaged observation. The film becomes a way to enter living ruins. These ruins are in-*corpo*-rated through the particular cinematographic technique (hand-held camera and constant close-ups).

Despite the problematic environment that the characters explore, the film is not dark. As Koza affirms, in the end, it leaves a sort of strange luminosity. In the final scene, the women play with a group of children in the mud by the riverbank.

Koza adds, “the incommensurate and the distance with the life of the others will stay aesthetically suspended for few minutes. It is a reasonable hope, even beautiful” (my translation). The film ends with a sense of faith in the possibilities to understand others; if not through what they say, at least, through how they feel.



## Through the Wall of Words: The Ruinous Cuban Body in Fernando Pérez's *La pared de las palabras*

“Estaré yo dando el sentido, el espíritu de esta época.  
O está solamente pasando por el matiz de mi sensibilidad.”  
Fernando Pérez in an interview with Magali Kabous

In the 36<sup>th</sup> Havana Film Festival of New Latin American Cinema, the Cuban filmmaker Fernando Pérez presented his first “independent” film: *La pared de las palabras* [The Wall of Words] (2014). Although Pérez has directed seven full-length films, his latest movie was the first one produced without the financial support of the ICAIC (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos). This is an important shift in his career, since he has always been closely tied to this institution. In fact, he affirms that he was born and raised within the ICAIC (Rodríguez-Mangual 189). This release became an exciting event during the festival and almost made the film the winner of the Audience Award. All of Pérez’s films deal in different ways with Cuban history, politics, and people, sometimes with a highly critical voice, sometimes with a subtle social commentary. His cinema is not a cinema of criticism, but of a communal construction. As he points out: “Un cine puede ser mejor cuando completa la realidad y trata de dar una mirada que no sea esquemática” [Cinema can be better when it completes reality and tries to give a look that is not schematic] (Rodríguez-Mangual 189).

*Clandestinos* (1987), his first full-length film, shows the love story of a young couple that live hidden from Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorial government. Because of their political beliefs and armed activism, they become persecuted, with one being killed. His next film, *Hello Hemingway* (1990), centers on the life of a talented young girl, Larita, who dreams of escaping her conflict-filled and economically-compromised family by earning a scholarship to study in the United States. Her efforts fail when the political crisis hits, and she sees no other option than to start working. One of Pérez’s most acclaimed films is *Madagascar* (1994), which explores again the

life of a young woman, Laurita, and her relationship with her mother, Laura. The film deploys above all Laurita's dissatisfaction and constant search for an identity in order to escape a social mandate that has shaped the mother's entire conception of life and dreams. Madagascar becomes a symbolic place where she can achieve freedom and authenticity, far from the ideological force that has formed the mother's generation.

In his next production, *La vida es silbar* [Life is to Whistle] (1998), Pérez presents three parallel stories: Mariana, a classical ballerina, struggles to keep her chastity vows and obtain an important role in the next show; Julia deals with a curious condition of fainting after hearing the word "sex"; and Elpidio seduces a foreign researcher while also questioning his identity and the presence of her lost mother named Cuba. By contrasting these different conflicts, the film frames a general sense of "abandonment", which intensifies the solitude and disconnection of the generation that they represent (Serra 96). Pérez's next film, the well-known *Suite Habana* (2003), is a documentary that follows a single day in the life of different Havana citizens. With no dialogues, this work becomes an exploration into various kinds of individuals in Cuban society not usually shown in cinema: A family with a young child with Down's syndrome, a married man that puts on a drag show in a bar with the help of his wife, a street vendor selling peanuts, a young father who builds an extension of the house for his own father and who also dances ballet. Pérez's interest to portray contemporary Cuba leads him to observe the life of its regular inhabitants closely, trying to embrace the internal rhythm of the city and a sense of hope despite some of its daily problems.

After the success of *Suite Habana*, Pérez's directed maybe his least popular film: *Madrigal* (2007). Here again, the film explores the younger generation. In this case, Javier, a talented actor, falls in love with Luisita. Their unsuccessful relationship leads Javier to evaluate his life and the

society where he belongs, which can be seen through the short story that he writes: A dystopian future from which everybody wishes to escape. Finally, *José Martí: el ojo del canario* [*José Martí: The Eye of the Canary*] (2010) is Pérez's most recent success. In this Cuban-Spanish co-production, the film shows Martí's childhood and adolescence, his familial conflicts and the awakening of his political activism, which ultimately lands him in prison.

Despite its diversity, Pérez's entire filmography presents a firm common thread: The conception of cinema as a means to discuss, represent, and re-construct Cuban revolutionary ideals towards a new century. His films depict the discomfort of a younger generation that has lost a sense of belonging to the ideals of his own generation, which also questions the bureaucracy and structure that have washed away the dreams of those that wanted to achieve a change. His cinema enters a tense space of disappointment and hope between the dynamics of the current structure of the Cuban government and society. *La pared de las palabras* does not break this continuity.

Pérez last film sets its story in contemporary Havana: Elena is the mother of Luis, an adult man who suffers from dystonia, a degenerative condition that has reached its final stage. Luis cannot talk or move freely, which prevents him from communicating with others and requires professional attention. Although he regularly visits his family's house, Luis stays in a mental health institution. Elena lives with Ale, her younger son, an enthusiastic artist whose last relationship fails because of his brother constant need for care. During these days, Elena's mother, Carmen, has returned from abroad to pay a visit to her family. She learns that things have not changed: Elena spends most of her time worrying about Luis, neglecting her other son, her job, and even her own appearance. Carmen points this out, but it seems that Elena does not want to listen. For these reasons, Carmen goes away again leaving a letter for her daughter. During an excursion, Luis is injured in a car accident, which makes Elena decide that it would be best to bring Luis back home.

Ale's relationship with a young scientist, one of Elena's colleague, ends due to the girl's little patience with Luis' condition. The family's ties crumble, and Elena's hope to understand her ill son leads to despair. Luis, whose health keeps worsening, becomes obsessed with a seed that one of his fellow patients, Maritza, his girlfriend from the institution, gave him. By the end of the film, Luis is able to plant the seed in the garden under the rain, which gives Elena a hint of what is happening inside her son's mind. This sense of hope under such circumstances is reinforced with one of the film's last shots: Elena spending the night with her two sons in the same bed, a sort of reconciliation of the entire family. *La pared de las palabras* is a film centered on the family's own drama that uses an intimate perspective and the sort of conflicts that arise when a "wall" blocks one from others. This barrier, sometimes physical and other times emotional, separates the characters until they find a way to reencounter each other.

As in his other films, Pérez's latest work also emphasizes the body's important role in the re-construction of Cuban society's own image. In *La pared*, physical senses become central from the very beginning: Luis walks to the fence that separates the hospital from the outside world and stares at a big garbage container. Orquídea, another patient, follows him and both stare at the trash: The sound of flies intensifies the perception of a fetid smell. Thus, the patients' proclivity for physical sensations start from the first scene. In fact, Orquídea, in a sort of synesthetic statement, declares: "apesta a silencio" [What a stink of silence]. Although unable to communicate with words, the film depicts from the beginning their capacity to comprehend the situation in which they live and express their conclusions in a physical and emotional way. Other scenes also sustain this aspect: Luis becomes fascinated by a block of ice that a truck delivers to the hospital every night. The shots that show the steam coming from the ice highlights Luis' interest. Later, when he notices that one patient is hurting himself by bumping his head against the wall, Luis walks towards

him and sits in between. The nurses then discover that he has several bruises on his back, and they cannot find the reason why. What the doctors cannot understand remains clear for the audience that has seen Luis' action expressing his physical and emotional connections with his surroundings (see Figures 11 and 12).



Figures 11 and 12: Physical sensations in the film.

This sort of connection is also shown when Maritza, a young girl with Down's syndrome who claims to be Luis' girlfriend, visits him at his house. After a night together, Elena goes to wake them up, but Maritza has disappeared. She finds her by the coast, crying, because she has realized that Luis is going to die. Unable to say it clearly with words, Maritza expresses her concerns and fears by crying and moaning, and Elena understands. In different manners, the film shows a "wall," a distance between those that live in the hospital as patients and those that have access to the outside world, the world of the "sane and healthy." But, at the same time, as the last example shows, this barrier can be crossed through emotional and sensitive means. All the characters learn to connect with each other in other ways, become more concerned with the way that the other "feels" the world and people, and try to understand the difference and overcome the barriers that distance one from each other. This sort of communication appears in the film in different scenes and becomes its most important statement: Affective and physical sensations connects one with each other more authentically and effectively.

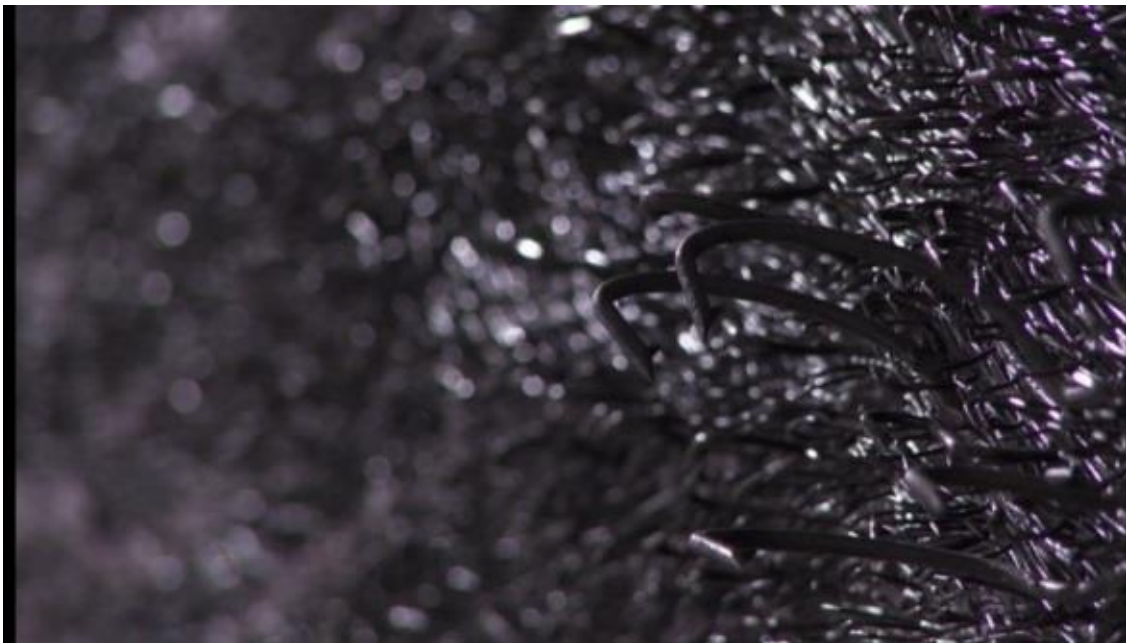
In terms of its cinematographic technique, Pérez's use of camera shots and voice-over in the last scene of the film makes this statement even clearer. During the movie, Ale appears while working on a painting in his room. All characters, including Luis – who actually touches oil and leaves his mark on the canvas with his brother's help – are able to see the artwork. Everyone within the narrative world of the film can see the painting, except the audience. On one of his walks by the coast, Ale finds a fish hook, and we later see him drilling several hooks and nails into the canvas. He donates the painting to the hospital, and they even remove the workers union board from the gallery. The patients are excited, and one of them cries before the painting. The doctor claims that it is a therapeutic element that will help the patients. Even when it is hung and displayed for the patients, the artwork remains hidden from the audience. Only at the end of the film, when Elena's family has finally reconciled, does the camera return to the hospital to show the patients staring at the artwork. One of them gets close and touches it. The painting is revealed to the audience: It shows a stormy and dark sea.<sup>9</sup> The camera gets closer and reveals the series of nails and hooks used: The focus changes and highlights their sharpened points.

At the same time, Luis' voice-over appears clearly speaking. This scene summarizes the film's whole philosophical statement and represents it cinematographically: The illusionary barrier created by words can be overcome by physical sensations and emotions. In this scene, the audience is not only able to finally "see" the painting, but also "hear" Luis' voice. A previous shot has shown that his seed has grown into a plant, which suggests Luis' death. However, in the last scene, Luis' voice speaks of those that were his fellow patients in the hospital while the camera shows the

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<sup>9</sup> The image of the sea appears in several of Pérez's film, usually as a space for an emotional confrontation, as if the characters can look at themselves (Larita in *Hello Hemingway* evaluates her unfortunate life and few options by the Malecón in front of furious waves). The sea is emotion in his filmography, and *La pared* uses this metaphor one more time. Many characters stay by the sea, thinking, crying, and having conversations. In fact, Elena, when talking to Luis' doctor, affirms that she needs the ocean to find peace and that in her dreams Luis is in the sea and she cannot reach him. Elena, who works as a scientist researching the ocean, decides to take a leave since she feels unable to continue.

painting. Luis refers to those that inhabit the other side of the wall; a wall that separates the “mad” from the “sane”. The voice is equalized, and it becomes repetitive, with an echo. This creates a sense of plurality, a collective Self that speaks, clearly marking his discourse as “us” before a “they” (see Figures 13, 14, and 15).



Figures 13, 14, and 15: Feeling/Touching Ale's painting.

Luis' voice exclaims:

Ahora estoy en otra dimensión. Donde no hacen falta las palabras. Desde aquí puedo ver más profundo. Ahora puedo hablar por todos. A los que se nos ha prohibido expresarnos. Y hablo por mí. Y por Maritza. Hablo por Yonisé. Hablo por Orquídea. Hablo por Alberto. Que no fue. Por Valentín. Que nunca. Por Rosendo. Que no pudo. Que le prohibieron. Que le impidieron. Que lo expulsaron. Que lo obligaron. Que excomulgaron. Que repudiaron.

[Now I am in a different dimension. Where words are not needed. I can see deeper from here. I can now talk for all those banned to express themselves. I talk for myself and Maritza. I talk for Yonisé, who could not. I talk for Orquídea. I talk for Alberto. For Valentín. Who never was. For Rosendo. Who could not. Who was forbidden. Who was prevented. Expelled. Forced. Excommunicated. Repudiated.]

In Spanish the verbs used by Luis reveal the presence of a “they”: *impidieron, prohibieron, expulsaron*, are conjugated in the third-person plural. The verb itself implies a “they” that performs the action. The question is: Who performs the action? And: The action is performed on whom? These verbs could be contrasted with the presence of an “us.” The final scene remains extremely suggestive, because this “they” could find several references: The limited words and their meanings (?), an oppressive government (?), the group of people that call themselves “sane” (?), other people from the past (?), etc. Nevertheless, this ambivalent ending does not appear different from the politically ambivalent condition of the film, an aspect that will be explored shortly.

The final scene also reveals that artistic expression encompasses an emotional and physical bridge that enables the encounter of the Other. Although unable to express themselves with words in the same way that the “sane” can do it on the other side of the wall (or even as the audience on the other side of the screen), the patients emotionally connect with Ale’s tempestuous soul, as if they understand him clearly. In fact, when Elena visits the hospital and sees one of the patients crying before the painting, she stares at him and then the artwork. He is able to “see” something about her son that she, before this point in the film, could not.

The film develops Elena’s own understanding that new bridges must be built to connect with both of her children: She struggles to comprehend Luis’ mind (she pleads “*dame una señal para saber que nada fue en vano*” [give me a signal to know that nothing has been in vain]) and Ale’s temperament (they get into an argument over Elena’s entire dedication to Luis). While Luis forces Elena to understand him beyond words, Ale finally comprehends his mother’s burden and



supports her. Then, the “wall” of the title does not only refer to Luis’ incapacity to speak, but also to everyone’s struggle to understand each other.

Moreover, the movie explores the dynamics within the hospital, and more interestingly, awakens a reflection concerning the distance between the “sane” and the “mad”. After noticing that Maritza is depressed, Elena decides to bring her home to visit Luis. When she looks at the hospital patio and sees all of the patients wandering, she asks Doris, the nurse: “Do you think they understand us?” The nurse answers: “When things are upside down, it does not mean there is no order. It is something different. You just have to understand them.” The “wall”, then, refers to a separation between the sane and the mad. Other walls could be implied: sick/healthy; words/feelings; us/them. All of these barriers, the film shows, can be overcome by affective means: It is all about standing on the other side in other ways, through other forms.

The “wall” also gains a strong metaphorical aspect when the camera constantly shows images of Havana’s ruins. From the beginning, the camera does not hide the buildings’ ruined condition in the city and especially not in the hospital (the broken and old fences, walls, floors, windows, etc). Furthermore, Elena and her family live in a small house by the coast and next to an abandoned and destroyed construction site. In fact, only its pillars remain. The presence of these ruins appears several times during the film when different characters walk or stay by the coast (see Figures 16 and 17).



Figures 16 and 17: Living in the ruins.

Then, when Carmen leaves and Elena reads the letter near the abandoned house, an important series of images of ruins are displayed. This becomes the most important scene that uses ruins more rhetorically than others (see Figures 18 and 19). Carmen's voice reads the letter while the camera pans and captures different ruins in Havana: Old buildings; walls; and structures falling



Figures 18 and 19: Havana Ruins while reading the letter.

apart. In her letter, Carmen briefly explains the reasons for her prompt departure and asks Elena to change. She speaks about the pain of seeing Luis' disease progressing; even more painful is seeing Elena wasting her life and neglecting Ale. Carmen later discusses her decision to live abroad: Not because of abandonment, but because of love. As she expresses, she wanted to "break a circle closed in itself until today". In this scene, the film shows that the wall between Carmen and Elena remains intact, given that, as Carmen writes in the letter, her daughter "never understood" her.

The continuous appearance of ruins refers to different kinds of metaphorical readings: The ruins are the family and its broken relations (Carmen and Elena never reconcile); or the ruins are Luis' decaying body (the car accident has worsened his condition; and nothing can be done). The ruins are also the entire Cuban social frameworks. The series of images depicts several ruins in Havana, which, in a way, makes the intimate and familial drama part of a broader dimension. Like Antonio José Ponte's short story collection *Arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* or Achy Obejas' novel *Ruins*, many writers, thinkers and filmmakers have explored the rhetorical nature of Cuban ruins

in cultural production.<sup>10</sup> For Pérez, ruins are a constant metaphorical element used in his films as a form to connect intimate conflicts with social forces that, in a way, provoke them. Most of his films – such as *Hello Hemingway*, *Suite Habana* or *Madagascar* for example – have already worked on the meaningfulness of human, emotional, and urban ruins. According to Serra, the familial and individual conflicts that most of Pérez’s films develop may be seen as the consequence of broader issues. As she explains:

Fernando Pérez retoma la noción de un espacio individual, emergente en un capitalismo incipiente, y focaliza dicho espacio como ‘zona porosa’, al decir de Walter Benjamin, donde se filtran los conflictos representados en los espacios de la ciudad. (89)

[Fernando Pérez resumes the notion of individual space, as emerged within an incipient capitalism, and focuses on such space as a ‘porous zone’, as put by Walter Benjamin, where conflicts represented in the city spaces filtrate.]

This common thread found in most of Pérez’s film can also be traced to *La pared*. Indeed, Elena’s family deals with several problems that may mirror other broader issues: Carmen’s desire and decision to exile herself and live out of the country; Ale’s anger and resignation for his artistic expression that does not find recognition; Elena’s exhaustion with living under several kinds of pressure (from her sons, her mother, her job, etc). In a way, all of these intimate issues indicate the existence of a common apathy and discomfort, something that the image of ruins extrapolates from the familial sphere to Cuban society as a whole.

As Serra explains, most of Pérez’s films work within a tension between apathy and rebelliousness (Laura and Laurita in *Madagascar* may be equated to Elena and Carmen in *La pared*). According to her, Havana’s urban space, in which we could include the hospital and Elena’s house, appears “como trasunto de una nación que vive su cotidianeidad con una mezcla de resignación y hastío, y que a duras penas reprime su rebeldía ante la rutina y la miseria” [as a

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<sup>10</sup> Vicky Unruh’s “All in a Day’s Work: Ruins Dwellers in Havana” explores several works that have referred to ruins and made use of them when reflecting on their philosophical and historical potential.

copy of a nation that lives its every-day-life with a mix of resignation and boredom and that hardly represses its rebelliousness before routine and misery] (103). Serra adds that Pérez's films offer to its characters a way to escape from their being trapped in closed circles, although this option never appears as absolute (103). In other words, Pérez's films are "ambivalent", because they make characters live within a permanent tension between imprisonment and escape. His films leave a sense of urgency to make changes and create new structures, but this always remains subtly assimilated within the characters' routine lives. They do not change. Things remain the same, and the ambivalent sense of rebelliousness persists. Pérez's film do not raise important criticisms about current Cuban political and social structures, but instead locate an intense and worrying interest on the socially perceived dissatisfaction. This sort of *tensa espera* [tense waiting], as Serra names it, could define most of his films, which foresaw, endured, and overcome the Special Period during the 1990s.

It is possible to find in the character of Orquídea, one of the patients in the hospital, a humorous and tragic reference to the stubborn and "old-fashioned" discourse of revolutionary men. As she describes herself, Orquídea is a revolutionary that has fought for her country, has been part of assemblies and political discussions. The ruins that surround every character do not only refer to the decay of Elena's family, but also to the power of a discourse nowadays as "ineffective". As Espinosa Mendoza explains, Orquídea is the image of a utopia "venida a menos" [impoverished, decadent, run down] (98). She speaks about a President, Elián the child, the Assembly, showing that in the past she used to have some powers that now seem to have abandoned her. Orquídea appears as the remains of an era that has drastically changed, a discourse "in ruins." On the other side, the side of the "sane", the figure of the head of the hospital's workers union functions as her reflection. Nobody pays him any attention nor obeys him, despite his authoritative position. The

ideal of revolution has lost its effectiveness for the characters in Pérez's films. As the director himself affirms, "I think many young Cubans have lost their illusions. It's true. And perhaps for them ideology, once converted to doctrine and reiterated, has lost its meaning. That is to say perhaps they need a different spirit, something not quite so established as the ideology of the revolution, the ideas of the revolution" (Stock 72).

Thus, ruins seems to have different referential dimensions within *La pared*. The ruins of Elena's family, which reveal a communal sense of dissatisfaction and exhaustion, also have other implications in the decaying ideological discourse represented in the figure of Orquídea. However, this does not mean that the film portrays a completely dark and hopeless environment. Ruins also become a space for reconstruction. Indeed, one of the metaphorical aspects of ruins is their capacity to create a space to re-negotiate past and present experiences in order to re-build a new idea(l) of nation and social groups. As Solimar Otero affirms,

What literary and visual representations of the ruins of Havana do, alongside the memories, dreams, and ruminations of those witnessing of these sites, is to open up the possibility of creating a catharsis that frees the subject of a coerced responsibility to nation, past, and family. With Havana crumbling around them, as a representation of past social, political, national loyalties and identifications, the witnesses can construct their own narrative connecting themselves to Cuba in a manner that asserts new destinations. (146)

Indeed, the characters find hope at the end of the film, which keeps them together and gives them the chance to re-construct their lives and affective ties: Elena finally claims to Ale "nada de lo que hemos hecho fue en vano" [Nothing of what we have done has been in vain]. Despite Carmen's exile, the family finds a way to restart and continue.

In summary, *La pared de las palabras* places in the image of the ruins its ambivalent political position: At the same time that characters face a decay of their environment and feel the desperation for a change (a sort of collective affect that involves all Cuban society), hope remains as a chance to re-build. For the film introduces, in a way similar to Loza and Fund's *Los labios*,

that connecting with others is a difficult challenge in which emotions and physical sensations become primary. Beyond the limited and meaningful range of words lays the body, the carnal surface of inscription and signification. Despite Luis' sick and dying body, which may also concentrate the ruinous condition of contemporary Cuban social framework, he is able to cross the barrier and finally speaks his voice. The cinematographic technique puts before the audience a glance of what remains on the other side; his claim becomes as perceivable as the sharpened nails that the camera's focus reveals.

### **The Voice of the Sick Body**

As exemplified by Colm Toibin's novels, Loza and Fund's film, and Perez's last production, the sick body appears as a sort of organic allegory that represents a broader *malady* affecting a social structure. The sick body is always in decaying motion, signifying something more while dying in front of the reader or spectator, as if this decomposition would reveal deeper concepts beneath the skin: The destruction of the Argentine economy due to neoliberal policies, the shift from a traditional to a modern mindset in 1990s Ireland, the remains of an economic and political crisis in contemporary Argentina, or a sense of discomfort and rebelliousness within current Cuban society. In one way or another, all of these works try to formulate a voice that speaks from the flesh, a sickened flesh that cries a "truth" that needs to be heard. This is how texture appears in these artworks. Each film and novel presents the decaying economic and social structures through corporeal means: A sick dying body that seems to burden the decline of a societal framework; and such decline becomes understandable/perceivable through the skin.

Sickness seems to be a communal condition, positing before the spectators' or readers' corporeality as an individual dimension that connects with a collective one. These works present embodiment as the most authentic and most efficient manner to encounter Otherness, as if other

ways, like the meaningfulness of words, were incomplete. The Other confronts the Self by showing a face (like in *Los labios*), or connecting through emotions or physical sensations (Declan's unbearable pain described in *The Blackwater Lightship* or one of the patients crying before Ale's painting in *La pared de las palabras*).

The sick body meets a metaphor usually used to extrapolate the individual and intimate drama to a major sphere: Ruins. This constant reference implies other ruinous elements, including, for instance: A body (Richard, Declan, the medical workers, Luis, etc.); a city or town (San Cristóbal, Havana); or an entire social body (Argentine and Irish social structures during the 1990s; the current young generation in Cuba). Ruins become the image that point out the decay of past ideological constructs (Orquídea and her revolutionary ideals in *La pared*), family circles (Elena's family in Pérez's film; Declan and Helen's family in *The Blackwater Lightship*), or communities (the population in San Cristóbal in *Los labios*; gay men in 1980s Argentina in Tóibín's *The Story of the Night*). Although ruins are the epitome of destruction, at the same time they become the starting point for reconstruction. By appealing to ruins, writers and filmmakers also draw on a chance for hope, a place for an encounter with the Other, a space for reconciliation and adaptation, as if past concepts of nation, family, or identity could be re-written from this moment. These bodies cannot avoid death, but they leave in their gradual disappearance a glance of hope and luminosity for the other human and mortal beings left behind.

## CHAPTER 2: BREAKING DOWN BOUNDARIES. (HOMO)EROTICISM AND SEXUAL DESIRE AS POLITICAL ARMAMENT.

At the beginning of his autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (*Before Night Falls*), the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas recounts his last visit to a public restroom, a well-known place for casual encounters with other men. He discovers that the advancement of AIDS in his body and the constant suffering that he faces are not the only sign that life is over for him. He noticed that nobody paid attention to him in the public bathroom, that there was no sense of expectation nor complicity, and that everybody continued with their erotic games while leaving him aside. He understood then that death was the best option, because life without desire was meaningless, a miserable act of mendacity. He affirms: “Yo ya no existía” [I didn’t exist anymore] (9). By simply exploring Arenas’ work, one can observe that sex and desire constitute the most powerful elements that define his style, his concerns, and his most significant political weapons.

In this chapter, I center the discussion on male (homo)sexual desire and the aroused body. However, this becomes problematic because, as the French theorist Guy Hocquenghem explains, “homosexual desire” can be seen as a meaningless expression.<sup>11</sup> For Hocquenghem, there is no “homosexual” or “heterosexual” quality that defines sexual attraction. No such categories could embrace its moving quality. As he explains, “Desire emerges in multiple forms, whose components are only divisible *a posteriori*, according to how we manipulate them. Just like heterosexual desire, homosexual desire is an arbitrarily frozen frame in an unbroken and polyvocal flux” (49-50). It

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<sup>11</sup> For Judith Butler, this is framed differently. The difference in the expression of desire also comments, expands, or touches upon the performances of social expectations about homo/hetero desires as projections and enactments; and this is also tied to certain dynamics of power and domination that affect the subject. Linking her ideas with a Hegelian tradition, Butler presents desire as a desire for recognition. She affirms: “If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that “undo” the person by conferring recognition, or “undo” the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not” (*Undoing Gender* 2).



seems that sexual desire remains as a dissident sensation that does not allow categorization, labeling, or separation. Even though the three works selected for this chapter present stories of relationships between men, all of them utilize sexual tension and attraction as elements for transgression. Within their particular contexts of production, these works show that sexual desire becomes the most powerful element to challenge a certain discourse of power. Particularly in this chapter, texture appears in the materialization of such homoerotic attraction. In one way or another, each artwork represents a growing eroticism and sexual tension between men and makes a certain political statement that can be phrased in the following manner: The body as the means that connects one to others cannot be constrained by any sort of imposed limitations; its sensations and feelings overcome such boundaries and expose the cultural devices and social norms that administer behavior, emotions, and relationships. Texture appears as a felt sexual desire that transgresses categorizations and limitations. In a way, these artworks make sexual attraction a powerful tool to make understandable/perceivable the fact that the body surpasses the limitations imposed by a certain discourse of power; more specifically, the heteronormative discourse.

Peter Sheridan's Irish film *Borstal Boy* (2000), inspired by Brendan Behan's novel is the first work analyzed in this chapter. Set in England during World War II, the film tells the story of the teenager Behan as a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) on his way to Liverpool for a bomb mission. After being apprehended, underage Behan is sent to Borstal, a reform institution for young offenders in East Anglia. Here, Behan is forced to live with other young men perceived by him to be the "enemies". Among his fellow British prisoners, Behan meets Charlie Milwall, a young sailor who was arrested for stealing, with whom he develops a deep friendship and later an erotic attraction. At the same time, Behan meets the director's daughter, Elizabeth, and falls in love with her. This defines a love triangle. Behan's relationship with both Elizabeth and Charlie

makes him confront his own beliefs and forces him into a self-examination, in which his patriotic identity seems to be in conflict with his sexual drives. Even though the film is a romanticized reading of these internal conflicts, *Borstal Boy* presents sexual desire as the means to transgress pre-established norms about masculinity, sexuality, and patriotism. Behan's militancy in the IRA and his sexual discoveries problematize the military conception of masculinity traditionally assigned to its members. Behan's attraction to Charlie encapsulates a "queer" reading for both sexual categories and national identities: The boundaries that separate sexualities and nationalities remain as external constructions from a heteronormative discourse of power that the desiring body overcomes.

Secondly, Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que anochezca* (1992) also develops a political conception of the aroused body. When facing the advanced stages of AIDS, Arenas finished writing his autobiography before committing suicide. The text describes his early life in Cuba, his connection to nature and his troubling family, his militancy in the Revolution, the development of his career as a writer, his problems with the government, his time in prison, and his escape to the United States in the Mariel Boatlift in 1980. From the very beginning, Arenas presents his sexual attraction to other men as a central part of his persona – from the young men that he saw bathing naked in a lake near his childhood home to the young lovers he encountered in Central Park during his exile in New York. Despite his early confidence in Castro's regime, Arenas discovers that his "homosexual condition", as he states, becomes an issue for the ideals that the government defends. Arenas encounters the strengthening of a strict conservative morality with the arrival of the Revolution and the development of the concept of "el hombre nuevo" [the new man], an ideal figure that would lead society to a world free of imperialist oppression. In order to contest the enactment of the "new man" according to an already existent value on homophobic machismo,

Arenas makes homosexual masculinities and sexual desire the most powerful elements for fighting back. By (homo)eroticizing certain masculine figures, such as police officers, farmers, and government's agents, Arenas criticizes the contradictory conditions of the "new man" discourse implemented by Castro's regime, which in the end reveals a deeper conception of masculinity found in Latin American societies (*machismo*).<sup>12</sup> In Arenas' work, the aroused body and sexual desire allows for the reversal of the discourse of power, since these seem to overthrow the strict conditions that defined the patriarchal conception of sexualities in this period of Castro's government. For Arenas, sexual desire becomes the most appealing and revolutionary "weapon" to utilize in his text. Desire, here again, transgresses the solid definition of sexual identities that defined some of the most controversial policies applied by the Cuban government after the beginning of the Revolution in 1959.

Thirdly, this chapter includes the analysis of the Argentine film *Plan B* (2009) directed by Marco Berger. The film tells the story of Bruno, a young man who tries to regain his girlfriend. However, she has established a new relationship with Pablo. Bruno then hears that Pablo may have had a sexual encounter with another man. Later, Bruno decides to carry on with a Plan B: To seduce Pablo so that he leaves his girlfriend, giving Bruno the chance to regain her affection. However, this does not happen because Bruno and Pablo, two self-declared heterosexual men, fall in love. Although the story may be quite simple, Berger's use of the camera captures and exposes

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to point out that the inequities between men and women in every aspect of our social and intimate lives is a worldwide phenomenon. In the case of Latin America, it is possible to define certain features that differentiate *machismo* from other similar forms in other parts of the world. At the same time, within this geographical classification, it is possible to observe clear differences between *machismo* in various countries or regions. I refer to Gustavo Subero's study of homosexuality in Latin American cinema and his methodological procedures to make this diverse and multiform phenomenon an approachable concept. He affirms: "[A]lthough Latin America may posit many contradictions due to the near impossible task of unifying such diversity, both national and regional, one has to agree ... that there is a need to examine the region as an unified whole, not to posit a distinct homogeneity, but merely as an organizing principle that nevertheless remains open to apprehension, disagreement, and perhaps its own dissolution" (2).

a growing sexual tension between the main characters. One can see several scenes with the two men simply sleeping together in a bed, almost naked, in long takes. In fact, the formal decision of displaying bodies and eroticizing them in long fixed takes makes the movie a political statement. One of the most important characteristics of Berger's filmography is his marked interest in representing sexual tension; more specifically, the tension within a homosocial environment (the locker room at a gym, for example). After several weeks, Bruno and Pablo become friends, and they start to spend nights together, even sharing a bed wearing only their underwear. Berger introduces a scene like this, putting the camera at the same level as the bed and filming the resting bodies for several minutes. In this way, the attention of the audience is centered on the process of seduction and attraction between these bodies. I argue that those who watch the film, because the display of eroticized bodies in long takes allows spectators to experience the attraction and sexual desire between these two men, can also perceive the sexual tension felt by the characters. By utilizing these particular techniques, the movie counteracts heteronormative conceptions of desire and the fixation of sexual identities.

The comparison between these three works reveals a similar conception of the desiring body and sexual arousal as transgressive devices. Queer desire becomes the means of overcoming similar ideological barriers that belong to different historical conditions in Sheridan, Arenas, and Berger's productions.

Whether in the post-Revolution Cuba of the 1960s and 1970s, the IRA conflicts in England during WWII, or in contemporary Argentina, the mode in which these works represent queer sexual desire functions as political "weapon," counteracting the dominance of patriarchal and/or heteronormative discursive constructions.

## Queer Desire and National Discourse: Peter Sheridan's *Borstal Boy*

“Over hill, and through sands, shall I fly for thy weal,  
Your holy delicate, white hands, shall girdle me with steel,  
At home, in your emerald bower, from morning's dawn till e'en,  
You'll think of me, my flower of flowers...”

Brendan sings to Charlie  
Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*

For many years, the figure of the Irish writer Brendan Behan (1923-1964) became an obsession for the theater director and filmmaker Peter Sheridan. Brother of Jim Sheridan, the well-known director of acclaimed Irish films such as *My Left Foot* (1989) and *In the Name of the Father* (1993), Peter Sheridan first attempted to make a biopic describing Brendan Behan's conflicted life. However, this production was never completed, and years later, he took the opportunity to direct a film inspired by Behan's novel *Borstal Boy* (1958). In this film, the writer describes his teenage years as an IRA member who attempts to carry out a bomb attack in Liverpool but is arrested. Although the book covered a certain period of Behan's life, in this story Sheridan summarized the writer's entire life. He affirms:

We are making a film different from the perception of Behan. I am not interested in period films which are museum pieces. And I'm not interested in putting books on screen. A lot of adaptations don't make the transition on to the screen; they feel bookish. There are no voice-overs in this film. There is no dialogue from the book in the film. We didn't go down that road. We wanted to do a film that's about the idealist young kid who goes to England with the bomb in the suitcase. ... The book doesn't focus on that story alone. It covers a huge area. But I thought that that tiny aspect of the book was really interesting. And in a way, you could tell the entire story of Behan's life by focusing on that. (Dwyer)

Sheridan's purpose can be easily traced in the film since most of the storyline does not actually occur in the original book. In this way, the film seems to portray a personal reading of Behan's character rather than a “faithful” representation of the writer. The film barely constructs the historical conditions that mark the history between Ireland and England during WWII. More interestingly, it is possible to say that the movie's configuration of the conflicts and characters

speaks more of Ireland's political and social conditions at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This romanticized "biographical" film set in the 1940's shows the spirit of an Irish society after a promising end of violence with the IRA and the flourishing of a new Irish national identity.

After the declaration of a cease-fire in 1994, the IRA was willing to commit to a "democratic peace process." Years later, on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, after an uncertain time trying to maintain peace, the drawn out negotiations came to an end and an agreement was reached. New regulations made a peaceful life between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland more promising (Bartlett 566). At the same time, Ireland was experiencing a rapid increase in economic growth, what then was called "The Celtic Tiger." As Bartlett explains, "between 1987 and 2000 the southern Irish economy shed its traditional features of high unemployment, low productivity, heavy emigration and chronic wage inflation allied to a strike culture, and became the fastest growing economy in the world" (537).

As Debbie Ging affirms, these political and social conditions marked the change of a self-image in Irish cultural production. Regarding cinema, she explains: "It is reasonable to expect [...] that such developments should result in a more pluralistic, multi-vocal film culture, and indeed there has been a marked increase in the visibility of gay, lesbian, immigrant, minority-ethnic and socially-excluded characters on the Irish screen in recent years" (182). The impact of economic growth also entailed a transformation in masculinities and the diversity of sexualities in contemporary Ireland. According to Madden, masculinity has been

transformed by the cultural and economic changes of the Celtic Tiger, and destabilized by the changing understandings of gender and sexuality resulting from the influence of feminism, the growing visibility of homosexuality, and perhaps also the increasing secularization of Ireland (and the erosion of the Catholic Church's moral and political authority) (70).

Hence, Sheridan's personal emphasis on the (homo)erotic relationship between Behan and his English fellow responds to the social conditions of the twenty-first century Ireland that embraced this sort of story. At the same time, the conflictive love story between an IRA member and a British sailor also entailed a social need to overcome nationalistic barriers between people. In the film, sexual and national identities crumble under the recognition of queer desire.

Most of the critics have recognized Sheridan's personal adaptation of the book in the film.<sup>13</sup> Even in the literary work Brendan Behan's character does not attempt to emulate or represent the real Behan; in other words, although it is possible to say that this is an autobiographical novel, the character of Behan becomes highly fictionalized. Thus, the film de-emphasizes Behan's "[r]epublicanism to create a politically correct bisexual coming of age story" (Connelly 97). Actually, the only elements maintained from the original book are the opening and closing scenes. As Connelly affirms: "Though the book briefly recounts some homosexual horseplay among the inmates, the film makes Behan's emerging and often confused sexuality a key theme, depicting his affections wavering between an English sailor and the warden's daughter" (97). The film softens the book's concerns with historical events, Republican poems and songs, and the IRA angle, and instead centers its attention on Behan's sexuality.

Like the book, the film is set in Behan's teenage years from 1939 to 1941. Behan, an IRA member since 1937, crosses to England carrying explosives to participate in a bombing

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<sup>13</sup> Filmmaker and critic Sergio Wolf explains the series of terms that refer to the product resulting from putting a literary work into cinema. In his book *Cine/Literatura. Ritos de pasaje*, he affirms that "adaptation" may not be the most accurate term, since it seems to imply a different value between the two codes – literary and cinematic –, giving a better appreciation of the latter. For Wolf, the notion of "transposition" more accurately describes the nature of transporting a book into a film. This term, Wolf explains, makes both languages be valued equally and it recognizes their formal difference. In a way, to "transpose" one into the other formal system implies to be respectful and conscious of the fact that one works with two completely linguistic systems. For this dissertation, however, I use the term "adaptation" due to the constant reference to this term in secondary bibliography. Even Wolf recognizes that "adaptation" is a term highly adopted by current criticism, when "transposition" does not.

campaign.<sup>14</sup> Behan is an agent, using the “guerrilla warfare” methods that characterized the IRA tactics in future years. Once in prison, Behan befriends Charlie Milwall. In the beginning Behan perceives Charlie’s sexual attraction, but rejects him, stating that he likes girls and that he is not “queer”. Later, the warden’s daughter, Elizabeth, arrives to live in this institution. A vivid and enthusiastic painter, she rekindles Behan’s interest for artistic expression. After a failed attempt to escape, resulting in the death of two other inmates, Behan decides to stage Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Ernest*. With Elizabeth’s help, the boys rehearse and successfully put on the drama, with Charlie playing a female role. During the play, Charlie kisses Behan. Later, both boys meet in the dark on the side of the institution, and Behan confides to Charlie his satisfaction and strange feelings during this kiss. Then, Behan kisses Charlie and leaves him when he hears others approaching. Later, Behan saves both Charlie and Elizabeth from being sexually assaulted by the boys in the dorms, and chooses personally to take care of Elizabeth, leaving the sailor alone again. Then, Charlie accepts an offer to return to his duties as a sailor and leaves Borstal. Behan and Elizabeth, who now have a romantic relationship, later learn that Charlie’s ship has been destroyed and that there are no survivors. Deeply affected, Behan is finally released and sent back to Ireland after promising not to attack to the English nation.

By confronting Behan with an erotic attraction to both Charlie and Elizabeth, the film presents sexual desire not only as “queer”, i.e. the means to transgress sexual categories or norms imposed by a heteronormative discourse, but also as the mode to overcome nationalistic boundaries. Young Behan questions both the validity of strict sexual categories that define

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<sup>14</sup> Brannigan explains: “The IRA at this time was a faction of the Irish Volunteer movement which had fought for and negotiated the Independence of the twenty-six ‘southern’ counties of the Island of Ireland from British rule. Its members continued to fight for the six ‘northern’ counties still under British rule, and in 1939 launched a bombing campaign in England, the aim of which was to terrorise [sic] the British government into ceding Northern Ireland to the Irish Free State.” (130-131).



identities (his own identity) and a patriarchal conception of Irishness that he represents by being part of the IRA. Queer desire and sexual attraction weaken the solid limitations that separate the cloistered sections of his identity (heterosexual and an IRA Irish patriot), making him face the idea that these categories are solely external constructions that are not sufficient to define a person. The film's statement embraces the arrival of a new Ireland in the 2000s by presenting a (queer) love story between an IRA member and an English sailor, something that perhaps could not have been done before. Despite its romanticized tone and non-innovative cinematographic language, the film presents sexual desire as a political means to criticize the validity of nationalistic and sexual categories.

Connecting sexuality and nationalistic discourse has been a constant in cultural production that deals with colonial and postcolonial struggles. In fact, Brannigan, quoting Ashis Nandy's article "The Psychology of Colonialism", affirms that colonial topographies are strongly gendered. He states: "[T]he consequence of the association of the imperial ruler with masculinity, and the effective 'feminisation' of the colonized, is the aggressive assertion of masculinity in anti-colonial discourse" (133). Ultimately, masculinity becomes the "absolute gender of the colonial struggle." This aspect is important when considering *Borstal Boy*'s attention to the boys' developing sexual attraction. Although Elizabeth plays an important role in the film, the presence of Charlie as a queer English sailor with whom Behan establishes a deep connection, expresses a struggle against both a patriarchal conception of masculinity and sexuality and a nationalistic discourse. The depiction of Behan as an IRA member who discovers a more fluid idea of desire and sexual identity problematizes the conception of masculinity embraced by the organization. As Richard English affirms, the IRA establishes a strict character for its members; in their own foundational paper, they "presented the organization as a 'military body pure and simple'" (24). For the IRA, its strong

military character corresponded to an authentic Irishness that “would be restored by a process of de-anglicization” (25). At the same time, the organization strongly assumed a conservative position given their religious influence. English explains: “They were overwhelmingly Catholic in background, and the profoundly religious sense evident among the republican revolutionaries was one that is deeply Catholic” (25). This also defines a strong patriarchal character since few women play a role in the organization: “The Irish Republic Army was also a male affair, with the role of women in the struggle generally celebrated in what a later age would read as very conservative terms” (26). Hence, the sole consideration of homosexuality within the IRA was not accepted.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the film highlights masculinity and sexuality as an issue strongly connected to historical and political struggles.<sup>16</sup>

In the film, Behan’s masculinity and heterosexuality is reaffirmed from the very beginning in different ways. As soon as he arrives to Liverpool, he buys an erotic magazine with the picture of a woman on the front page. After he is apprehended, the guards accuse him of not liking girls at the same time that they say the IRA is just a bunch of criminals. Behan answers: “They are dying for their country”. Nationalism and sexuality are tied from the first scenes. Once he is sent to Borstal, the film presents different spaces for the display of traditional masculinity: The boys share cigarettes, play soccer and then rugby, work together in the fields, and later drink smuggled

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<sup>15</sup> In fact, when Behan attempted to publish his novel *Borstal Boy*, he encountered strong rejection. Kearney explains: “[His colleagues] would regard his friendship in Borstal as fraternizing with the enemy, the element of homosexuality as an obscene insult to the good name of republicanism.” (85)

<sup>16</sup> In his book *Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility*, Patrick McGee observes the relations between sexuality and national discourse in Ireland by analyzing the film *The Crying Game* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1992). McGee’s attention emphasizes the ambivalence of the historical context to which the film responds captured in its aesthetic form (101). He analyzes the figures of the female character Jude, an IRA rebel who later becomes one of the antagonists, and the figure of Dil, the main character’s “lover,” a British transsexual woman who presents a more complex dimension. By analyzing the politics of the aesthetic form, McGee highlights the different configurations of a nation through sexuality and gender displayed in the movie. McGee’s analysis constructs in the end the ambivalence and unresolved historical and political issues experienced in Ireland that find a way to impregnate the aesthetic form in the film. Similar to our analysis of *Borstal Boy*, McGee’s conceptions of sexuality, gender, and nations interact profoundly in the aesthetic form.

alcohol. This is an important aspect that the film presents from the beginning: The masculinity that Behan seems to demonstrate in front of the “enemy” is the one that later changes due to his experiences with Charlie and Elizabeth. The emphasis on Behan’s first conception of traditional masculinity shown in the first scenes of the film is also present in the first part of the original book. In relation to the autobiographical novel, Brannigan notes the following comments about masculinity, which could also be applied to the film:

The masculine authority of the wardens and the prison regime is designed to emasculate the prisoners, by compelling them into submission and silence. [...] But similarly, the means for resistance and subterfuge are inevitably defined too by masculine tropes: when Behan is threatened by anti-Irish intimidation in the prison his instinctive response is to demonstrate his masculine authority through a brutal display of violence (134).

This would explain Behan’s first violent reactions after meeting Charlie. At the beginning of the film, Charlie is introduced as another criminal recently apprehended by the police who tries to approach Behan. The young Irishman answers violently that he despises sailors. Later in the prison cell that both characters share, Behan awakes after a nightmare, and Charlie comforts him. He also calls him an “angel” and kisses his forehead. Behan again reacts violently and tells him to leave him alone.

If Behan is introduced by displaying traditional traits of masculinity, Charlie is “feminized” from the beginning. Once in Borstal, when working in the fields, one of the guards tells him to work harder, implying that his physical performance is not like the others. In some ways, everybody perceives him as the “queer.” Charlie’s attempts to get closer to Behan fail until they fight in a demonstration at the gym.<sup>17</sup> Charlie ends up winning, which later makes Behan accept Charlie’s friendship, but he also clearly claims: “I’m not queer”.

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<sup>17</sup> The display of physical force is also connected to how hierarchies and power play an important role in sexual fantasies. For Alan Sinfield, “Fantasies of dominance and subjection should be regarded as unsurprising transmutations of prevailing social relations of domination and subordination. Hierarchy is neither an aberration nor a misfortune in desire, but integral with it. Indeed, it may well be that power difference is the ground of the erotic;

Perhaps the most important reference that reunites both the questioning on the traditional discourse of sexuality and nationalism is the figure of Oscar Wilde. In his first visit to the library, Behan talks to the librarian (also “feminized” through his gestures, moves, and form to speech) and asks him for some history books. The librarian learns that Behan is Irish and suggests that he read Oscar Wilde since he was a “fellow Irishman, a prisoner, a rebel.” However, Behan responds by referring to Wilde’s sexual inclinations: “He was not an Irishman if he was up to that game.” At this point in the film, a queer identity negates the nationalistic identification.<sup>18</sup> But later in the movie, after his friends’ death during the attempt to escape, Behan starts reading Wilde and decides to stage one of his most famous plays, *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Little by little, these two aspects that define Wilde’s persona (homosexuality and Irishness) are reconciled in young Behan’s mind, which triggers his interest in the writer’s work.

In addition, rugby is an activity that connects a certain idea of masculinity with nationalism. After the boys receive a rugby ball, one of the guards teaches them how to play. Behan does not join because this is clearly an English game. In the book, the character implies that rugby is a game associated with the cultural legacy of imperialism. Referring to the novel – something one could apply to the film –, Brannigan explains,

Behan pulls rugby across the colonial divide, so that a game representing Englishness in Ireland seems to speak the language of anti-colonial struggle. In one sense, this is a colonizing gesture on behalf of Irish nationalism, appropriating the other within the discourse of anti-colonialism [...]. (148)

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that is sexy.” (58) Charlie and Behan’s fight, that later contributes to the development of their relationship, can be read as a validation of Charlie’s masculinity which assures Behan’s attention. Because Charlie wins, Behan accepts to consider him as a friend.

<sup>18</sup> This dichotomy between homosexuality and national discourse has a deep roots in Irish history. As Conrad explains, “Since the early part of the twentieth century, homosexuality has been represented as ‘foreign’ to nationalisms in Ireland, particularly when the borders of the nation are perceived to be under threat. [...] homosexuality has troubled the notion of nationalism and ‘Irishness’” (124-125).

In Sheridan's film, rugby and its implications acquire an important meaning when Behan later decides to join a team with his fellows and play against the guards. Lieutenant Keaton, an English Army Officer, who is also interested in Elizabeth, leads the opposing team. The game then becomes not only a space to fight for Elizabeth's attention or a battleground of nationalistic ideals, but also a display of masculinity. Again, the depiction of colonial struggle is deeply gendered.

The affective and erotic attraction between the characters is what later makes them overcome their prejudices. In this sense, the most important narrative line is Behan's developing homoerotic desire for Charlie. Given Behan's violent reactions to reject homosexuality, the two start as individuals who are apart; later they get closer and closer. They become friends and even plan an escape together. The most defining moments in their story take place at the end of the film. Helped by the librarian, Behan stages Wilde's drama. The "feminized" characters (the librarian and Charlie) play the feminine roles. Backstage, when Elizabeth helps Charlie to get dressed, she says "it's so hard to tell someone that you like him." She implies that not only does she fancy Behan, but Charlie too. Once on the stage, playing her role, Charlie kisses Behan in front of everybody. After the play, deeply moved, Behan isolates himself with a bottle of alcohol. Charlie (not in "drag" anymore) approaches, and Behan says the following:

BEHAN: It was strange. When I kissed you during the play, it felt alright. [Charlie laughs]  
Because I was someone else. Does that make sense?

CHARLIE: You don't have to pretend to be anyone. Just be yourself.

BEHAN: Can I?

CHARLIE: Yeah. [Behan kisses Charlie].

What this scene shows is Behan's accepting his own desire. As he says, during the play he was another person, performing a character. But later, during the second kiss, he was himself.

The assumption of the homoerotic desire allows the character to overthrow any previous definition or categorization of his sexuality. In fact, this moment does not become a moment for

Behan to re-define himself, but rather a moment to question the validity of such definitions. The “queer” quality of the film lays in the authentication of desire beyond categories or needs to characterize identities. At the same time, sexual desire becomes the ultimate sensation that breaks the nationalistic and patriarchal discourse that Behan embodies (see Figures 20 and 21).



Figures 20 and 21: Charlie and Behan’s first and second kiss.

In the film, as well as in the original novel, there is a “symbolic conversion of carceral spaces of containment into the sites of sexual desire” (138). As Brannigan affirms, “Desire, it seems, is a more potent force than sexual release, and works to transform the spaces of containment and repression into sites of fantasy [...]” (138). Although Charlie’s character is more silent and absent in the book, the homoerotic relationship with Behan remains a constant during the entire novel. In fact, this “emphasizes the transgressive potential of same-sex relations in relation to the homosocial discourses of imperialism and nationalism” (142). The film clearly depicts and highlights the potential for homoerotic desire as a significant element to transgress imperialist, nationalistic, and also patriarchal discourses.

Some of the last words that Behan says at the end of the film seem to evoke the context of production (Ireland in the 2000s) more importantly than the original novel and set in its historical circumstances. Behan talks to Elizabeth after they find out that Charlie has died, and says: “I was taught to hate the English. And I came here to learn about love. [...] It is much stronger than hate. I learnt that from you and Charlie. I have it both ways. Just like Oscar Wilde.” Despite its

romanticized dialogues and conceptions of love, lines like these reveal Irish society's spirit at the beginning of the twenty-first century: its inhabitants enjoyed economic growth, were hopeful for a definite end of violence with the IRA, open to new cultures and identities, and reluctant to continue embracing traditional values propelled by a weakened religious institution. As Bowyer explains, in contemporary Ireland, rhetorical strategies concerning homosexuality had changed deeply by the first years of the new century. According to her, these changes take place

in both what 'the homosexual' may come to represent in relation to national identity, and changes in the connotations afforded to the idea of 'traditional values' in relation to sexuality. The homosexual may come to be seen neither as foreign nor as a contaminant; instead a stereotype of gay male identity may be celebrated as iconic of Ireland's multicultural present and future (802).

Sheridan's film, then, seems to contribute to this cultural construction of homosexuality as part of a new Ireland facing a new era. In any case, the (homo)erotic attraction and desiring bodies in the film reveal a strong political character since desire becomes the means to question the validity of the discourse of power (heteronormative and nationalistic) that categorizes identities. The desiring body, then, is a corporeal representation that the film extracts from the original novel, highlighting its political meaning. Behan and Charlie's sexual desire synthesizes a criticism of conservative ideas that deeply affected the marginalization of homosexuals in Ireland and the country's violent struggles in its history with England.

### **The Writer, the Anus, and the New Homosexual: Reinaldo Arenas' *Antes que Anochezca***

“Cómo expresar la angustia cuando sabes que  
además de este cuerpo no tienes otra cosa,  
y nada va a perdurar, y ya nada te va a pertenecer.”  
*Otra vez el mar*, Reinaldo Arenas

“Mi hombría es aceptarme diferente  
Ser cobarde es mucho más duro  
Yo no pongo la otra mejilla  
Pongo el culo compañero”  
“Manifiesto (Hablo por mi diferencia),” Pedro Lemebel

Unlike Sheridan's film, homosexuality and queer desire are more emphatically represented in Reinaldo Arenas' work. In fact, in his autobiography *Antes que Anochezca*, (homo)eroticism and sexuality become one of the most important concerns, as well as Arenas' denunciation of the repressive policies of Fidel Castro's regime. In his work, homoerotic desire becomes the most important armory that the writer utilizes to counteract the strong patriarchal discourse that he endured in the flesh while living in Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s. Corporeality is constantly referred to as a means to uncover the Revolution's oppressive and conservative façade. Throughout the entire text, Arenas depicts several "revolutionary" men, mostly associated with the government or with traditional "hyper-masculine" jobs (such as farmers, police officers, prison guards, Marxist professors, etc.) as participants in homosexual encounters and/or driven by homoerotic desire. The constant homoerotization of the Cuban "macho" and the "faggotization" of their sexual identity serve as a means for Arenas to criticize the Revolution's patriarchal discourse of power. Desire serves Arenas to reveal the contradictions and (subtle) homophobic oppression found in the discourse of the "New Man", formed by Ernesto "Che" Guevara's writing and strongly enforced by the government. Following Guy Hocquenghem and Beatriz Preciado's consideration of the anus as a space to counteract the patriarchal discourse, Arenas could be seen as a writer who emphatically exposes the "privatization of the anus." Indeed, Arenas' work defies machismo and the regime's discourse, and instead presents a revolution inside the Revolution. Arenas challenges the patriarchal discourse by revolutionizing the anus and contesting the intrinsic *machista* character also present in other Latin American countries.

Scholars have repeatedly discussed the history of the Cuban government's repression of homosexuals during the 1960s and 1970s (Ocasio, Foster 1993, Lumsden, Soto, Subero, Young). Ocasio's article highlights the key incidents that summarize official policies against homosexuality



in Cuba. According to Ocasio, the first persecutions took place on the island in 1961, when the police organized street raids to apprehend homosexual prostitutes. The writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante called it the “Night of the Three P’s” (prostitutes, pimps, and ‘pájaros’ [birds] – Cuban slang for effeminate homosexuals) (80). Among the “detained” was the well-known writer Virgilio Piñera, arrested in his house. In 1965, a national campaign also contribute to an official oppression towards gays in Cuba: “Identified” homosexuals were taken to open trials in order to “morally purge” the new revolutionary society (80). Later in 1965, the visit and expulsion of the American poet Allen Ginsberg for his confrontation with the government regarding the oppression of young homosexual Cubans was another telling event. That same year, the inauguration of the UMAP (Unidad Militar para el Aumento de la Producción – Military Unit for the Increase of Production) marked an important moment in the history of Cuba’s oppression of homosexuality. Although the dates of its beginning and end are not clear (82), the existence of this unit can be confirmed by evidence from several testimonies (Almendros and Jiménez), including some from Arenas’ himself.

As Guerra explains, the euphemism behind the name “Military Unit for the Increase of Production” actually refers to isolated sugar lands of Camagüey province. These camps “imprisoned thousands of self-acknowledged, closeted and presumed homosexuals for up to three years without charge” (268). At the same time, other individuals whose communities and social groups did not contribute to revolutionary mandates to form a homogeneous collectivity (such as Jehovah’s witnesses, Catholic priests, Seventh Day Adventists, certain artists, intellectuals or peasants) were also imprisoned in this unit. The purpose of this place was to re-educate and rehabilitate Cubans who were perceived as *anti-sociales*, as opponents of the new revolutionary ideals. Indeed, as José Yglesias, a sympathizer of the government, explains, this unit was created

“to take care of young men of military age whose incorporation into the Army for military training was considered unfeasible. Young men known to avoid work and study were candidates; so were known counter-revolutionaries; and also immoralists, a category that included homosexuals” (quoted by Lumsden, 65-66). These programs of re-education/re-orientation were clearly assumed to be programs of “militarization and masculinization.” In fact, “the slogan written over the entrance to the camps was, according to some witnesses, ‘Work will make you men’” (Epps 242).

Arenas’ non-conformity to government’s mandates, the publication of his novel *El mundo alucinante* (1969) outside the country without official approval, and his open homosexuality made him a target for the “cleansing” that the regime carried out during those years. Arenas’ imprisonment in El Morro and his later exile during the massive Mariel boatlift to the US in 1980 marked his last period in Cuba as an “undesirable” individual for the Revolution. After an increasing tension that began after the occupation of the Peruvian embassy in March 1980, the Cuban government decided to allow all Cubans to migrate into the United States by providing transportation from the Mariel port. As Peña affirms, “Castro discredited those who wanted to leave and characterized them as undesirables, antisocials, lumpen proletariat, and *escoria* (scum) and added that the United States was ‘performing a tremendous sanitary service’ by accepting them” (485).

These events raised strong voices that criticized Castro’s government. Among those, Allen Young called the regime a “heterosexual dictatorship,” strengthened by the state-controlled apparatus (4). These clear “homosexual purges” were rooted in different cultural structures that defined policies applied by the Cuban government during these decades. The creation and development of the discourse regarding the “New Man”, headed by Ernesto “Che” Guevara, is connected to a broader cultural paradigm that affects all of Latin America’s culture: *Machismo*.

Guevara's text "El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba" ("Socialism and the Man in Cuba") (1965) was a capital work that defined several cultural policies applied in the first decades of the Revolution. As explained by Serra, the text discusses "the tension between the individual and the collective"; furthermore, Guevara coins "the expression 'the new man' to refer to the new person embodying the radical change that the Cuban regime was invested in promoting" (1). This figure became the model of an individual that later influenced politics and culture all over Latin America. In Guevara's words, a somewhat subtle patriarchal discourse can be found. The process of "a conscious self-education" (Guevara 6) that his text proposes in order to construct a Revolution seems to involve an eradication of "anti-moralistic" acts, including those like homosexuality. The New Man must be born free from ideals of the nineteenth century as well as from some ideas of "our decadent and pervert century" (13). Guevara's language entails a strong display of Catholic morality that he connects to revolutionary ideas:

La culpabilidad de muchos de nuestros intelectuales y artistas reside en su pecado original; no son auténticamente revolucionarios. [...] Las nuevas generaciones vendrán libres del pecado original. [...] Nuestra tarea consiste en impedir que la generación actual, dislocada por sus conflictos, se pervierta y pervierta a las nuevas. (14)

[The guilt of many of our intellectuals and artists lays in their original sin; they are not truly revolutionaries. ... New generations will come free from the original sin. ... Our duty is to prevent that the current generation, dislocated by its conflicts, becomes perverted and perverts the new ones.]

Although Guevara's fervent rejection of homosexuality has been rumored,<sup>19</sup> his text does not address it directly as an issue that the government has to confront and eradicate. However, the use of terms such as "original sin" and "guilt" when referring to capitalist or bourgeois' qualities

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<sup>19</sup> Lumsden refers to an event that reveals Guevara's homophobia: "[the officials] could not conceive how homosexual intellectuals could be valued in their own terms as intellectuals or as positive contributors to the revolutionary transformation of Cuba. Che Guevara, admired by so many for his commitment to the creation of the "new man," was apparently among those unable to conceive that *maricones* could have any redeeming qualities. He demanded to know "which asshole reads this *maricón*?" when he saw the work of Virgilio Piñera on display in the Cuban embassy in Algiers" (60)

makes homosexuality (historically assigned as “abominable sin”) another despicable element to erase. As he says, the construction of the New Man is a “mechanism [that] must be moral in character” (6). The cultural policy applied by the government in these years is strongly tied to Guevara’s ideals presented in his text. The deep introduction of this discourse in the Cuban government enforced previous considerations of rejection towards homosexuals and, above all, it legitimized them.

In this sense, a series of official “gender policies” were a substantial part of Cuban plans to reform the economy and education based on a “volunteer labour force and legitimate politically authoritarian ideals among emerging generations of citizens raised under the Revolution” (Guerra 269). The rejection of homosexuals was, then, based on the idea that they would disrupt the official discourse of how young Cuban men and women should act in order to make the Revolution successful. Guerra explains:

[T]he state targeted homosexuality because top ideologues of the Revolution understood it as a form of gender parody that mocked state-defined ideals of revolutionary manhood and femininity, destabilizing the principles by which citizens were meant to interpret their reality and act within it. Cuban youth’s adoption of these gender ideals proved critical to the construction of the Revolution as a new, more liberating form of patriarchy in which all Cubans could enlist. (271)

The display of violence and repression towards homosexuals thus highlights one of the strongest contradictions in Castro’s regime, which is that “el estado castrista reduplica el cinismo del código moral de la sociedad burguesa que había pretendido revolucionar” [Castro’s state reduplicates the cynicism of the bourgeois society’s moral code that it attempted to revolutionize] (Foster “Consideraciones...”, 93). Indeed, what seems to make homosexuals undesirable individuals for the Cuban government during this period was not the same-sex sexual acts *per se*, but rather “transgressing gender norms in ways associated with male homosexuality – in other words, appearing visibly or “obviously” gay” (Peña 487).

Although a strong criticism could be given to Castro's Revolution and its oppression of homosexuals, it is important to consider that the government inherited a strong *machista* cultural structure that also defines a large section of Latin American culture. For example, Lumsden reveals that machismo and homophobia existed in pre-Revolution Cuban (54).<sup>20</sup> However, referring to Latin America as a single and uniform cultural unity can be problematic.<sup>21</sup> Yet, it is still possible to trace the constant influence of machismo and the depiction of homosexuality as factors that characterize a supra-national region. According to Subero, machismo in Latin America is a (inherited)<sup>22</sup> social construct that forms a certain idea of masculinity and shapes identities: "Latin American masculinity depends heavily on the exaggerated and overt display of hypermasculine behavior and, consequently, those individuals whose behavior breaks from this socially-established mould are regarded as subversive socio-sexual entities" (13).

In this sense, those homosexuals that show themselves as "masculine gendered" do not represent a real threat for masculinity (15). In the Cuban context, even Castro, in an interview, points out that at a certain moment there was a "rigidity" towards homosexuality. It was not

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<sup>20</sup> The use of this term referring to the stigma and rejection of homosexuals or homosexual activity become problematic in the Latin American context. In fact, "despite their repugnance toward homosexually identified people-that is, effeminate men-Cubans were more able than North Americans to conceive that males in certain circumstances could desire other males as outlets for their sexual drives. For this reason, homophobia, insofar as it implies fear of same-sex sex, is a problematic term to apply to Cuban (and Latin American) machismo. In fact, until quite recently the term was scarcely used in Cuba. It acquired some popular currency after the institutionalized oppression of homosexuals in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the widening public discourse initiated by the U.S. gay liberation movement, the term eventually acquired its current meaning in Cuba-scorn and repugnance of individuals identified as homosexuals". (Lumsden 32)

<sup>21</sup> As Subero explains, "Some theorists may argue that to continue reading Latin America as a homogeneous entity only perpetuates the cycle of linguistic derogatory minimisation the continent has been subjected to since being homogenized and trivialized by a Eurocentric construction" (2).

<sup>22</sup> Today, as Subero presents, machismo is experienced as "a combination of the traumatic scar left by the violent process of conquest and colonisation in America, and the overt rejection of all forms of Europeanisation, typically associated with some manner of feminisation, that convey the idea of Anglo-European superiority. In other words, machismo is essentially a learned behavior, as such it is a conditioned behavior. We males learn to act in a 'manly' way from other males around us; the 'macho' that preceded us was learned from the cultures which it evolved" (8).

repression, but rather a “somewhat rigid, a somewhat machista, way of seeing the problem, true enough, but that is associated with what we inherited, our received culture” (quoted by Epps, 254).

This is the context in which Arenas produces and defies the government’s strengthening and legitimization of the *machista* discourse. In this sense, *Antes que anochezca* “can be read as the construction of one man’s homoerotic identity in opposition to the hegemonic and patriarchal definitions of the chastely virile image of the ‘new man’ promoted by the revolution” (Soto 25). In this section, I focus on how Arenas utilizes (homo)erotic desire and the aroused body to challenge the *machista* discourse and the government’s oppression and contradictions.

From the very beginning of *Antes que anochezca*, when Arenas refers to his childhood, several male figures are eroticized by the narrator: Some of his classmates in school; some young men that he encountered bathing naked in the lake; and also his grandfather. Among these, Arenas’ highlights how erroneous it is to consider peasants and farmers (traditionally described as “virile” or “masculine” figures) as exempt of homoerotic desire.

Es falsa esa teoría sostenida por algunos acerca de la inocencia sexual de los campesinos; en los medios campesinos hay una fuerza erótica que, generalmente, supera todos los prejuicios, represiones y castigos. Esa fuerza, la fuerza de la naturaleza, se impone. Creo que en el campo son pocos los hombres que no han tenido relaciones con otros hombres; en ellos los deseos del cuerpo están por encima de todos los sentimientos machistas que nuestros padres se encargaron de inculcarlos (40)

[There is no truth to the theory, held by some, about the sexual innocence of peasants. In the country, sexual energy generally overcomes all prejudice, repression, and punishment. That force, the force of nature, dominates. In the country, I think, it is a rare man who has not had sexual relations with another man. Physical desire overpowers whatever feelings of machismo our fathers take upon themselves to instill in us. (19)]

Arenas clearly identifies the influence of machismo not only in Cuban masculinity, but also in his own sexual identity and behavior, further highlighting that this has been exalted by the Revolution (71). In this way, eroticizing all masculine *machos* that he encounters challenges the validity of the patriarchal discourse of machismo. Sexual desire reveals the constructed nature of

macho masculinity. But his critical aim also includes the role of the government as an oppressive and quasi-omnipresent entity. This is the reason why Arenas constantly (homo)eroticizes *machos* that work for and/or are directly related to Castro's regime.

Such macho figures include communist recruits (118, 119, 279), young police officers employed by the government (120-121), entire armies (125), official guards that supervise sugar camps (155), prison guards (216), and even the official that questioned him in jail (223). Among these individuals that Arenas' presents, are some of his professors who have a voracious need for homosexual sex. Arenas himself studied in La Habana to become an agronomist accountant; and he depicts his professors from the institutions he attended at this point of his life. Unlike most of the "machos" that he describes who prefer to have the "active" role, the professors demonstrates other preferences:

Algunos profesores, por no decir la mayoría, tenían sus relaciones sexuales con los alumnos; había uno, llamado Juan, que había tenido relaciones con un centenar de estudiantes. A veces, frente a su cuarto, los jóvenes hacían cola para templárselo; todo eso yo lo vi. Además, uno de mis compañeros, famoso por tener uno de los falos más grandes de toda la escuela, me contaba que era uno de los preferidos de aquel profesor de marxismo. (74)

[Some of the professors, if not the majority, had sexual encounters with their students; there was one, Juan, who had relations with close to a hundred students. Sometimes the young men lined up by his room to fuck him; I actually saw this. In addition, a classmate of mine, reputed to have one of the largest penises in school, told me that he was a favorite of that professor of Marxism. (50-51)]

The fact that Arenas makes these macho official agents participants of homosexual activity, and more importantly by making them have a "passive" role, concentrates the most revolutionary qualities of his writings, sometimes misread by scholars. As I have argued before, the mode in which Arenas includes the government in homosexual acts and homoerotic desire entails a clear contestation of its repressive policies and machista discourse. Arenas distinguishes (homosexual) masculinities depending on a defined sexual role (*activo* or *pasivo*), qualifying the first as the "real

men” that all “locas” (“fags”) desire, which is typically seen as a repetition of patriarchal dichotomies. Richmond Ellis, for example, affirms that Arenas “embraces essentialism insofar as he classifies males as either inherently masculine or feminine [...]. He thereby reabsorbs the gay/straight dichotomy into a feminine/masculine binary opposition” (127-128). However, Arenas’ writing should be read within Latin American cultural structures that shaped his conceptions of sexuality, which ultimately he attempts to defy. But Ellis mistakenly applies concepts coming from the US and Europe’s feminism and queer theory, which lead to a partial reading of Arenas’ work.

It is important to consider that homosexuality and homoerotic desire in Latin America cannot be completely equated to those from United States or Europe. Various historical and cultural backgrounds have made these two supra-national geographies differ in their conceptions of sexual identities. Tomás Almaguer’s article, which analyzes Chicano gay men and their struggles within two different cultural conceptions of homosexuality, identifies one aspect of this difference. Almaguer explains:

The rules that define and stigmatize homosexuality in Mexican [Latin American] culture operate under a logic and a discursive practice different from those of the bourgeois sexual system that shaped the emergence of contemporary gay/lesbian identity in the US. Each sexual system confers meaning to homosexuality by giving different weight to the two fundamental features of human sexuality that Freud delineated in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: sexual object choice and sexual aim. The structured meaning of homosexuality in the European-American context rests on the sexual object choice one makes – i.e., the biological sex of the person toward whom sexual activity is directed. Mexican / Latin-American sexual system, on the other hand, confers meaning to homosexual practices according to sexual aim – i.e., the act one wants to perform with another person (of either biological sex). (256-257)

The attempt to apply notions and conceptions of sexuality based on the American-European sexual system on Latin American objects of study fails most of the time. Thus, these concepts that do not consider the cultural structure of Arenas’ work, like Ellis’ article, become



inapplicable and divert the discussion and criticism away from what his writing presents. Indeed, as Almaguer affirms, within the Latin American sexual system, the “active” participant of the homosexual act is not burdened with the stigmatization that the “passive” one bears: “It is primarily the anal-passive individual who is stigmatized for playing the subservient, feminine role” (257). Since the sexual aim is highlighted, the object that satisfies the “macho”, active male becomes secondary. However, for the male “receiver”, the consequence is different. As Lancaster reaffirms, unlike in the US or Europe, in Latin America “desire is not an issue here and it is irrelevant to what degree one is attracted sexually to members of one’s own sex. What matters is the manner in which one is attracted to other males” (113).

The homoerotization of official machos and, above all, the “passivization” of their homosexual behavior that Arenas presents in his texts become his most effective mode to counteract the government’s patriarchal discourse. The “passive” role of the Marxist professor is a transgressive manner to portray (homo)erotic desire and invest it with a political critique. The regime’s strongest ideals represented in the image of the professor can be literally and symbolically “fucked” by “one of the biggest penises” of the young students; and above all, the professor “wants” it. He desires it. Homoerotic desire, in Arenas’ autobiography, overcomes those exalted ideals of the New Man that line up with the Cuban *machista* social structure and that defined the regime’s oppressive policing.

In another narrative text by Arenas, *El color del verano* (*The Color of Summer*) (1990), one of the novels in the collection that represents the author’s coming-of-age story (usually referred as *pentagonía*), the “passivization” of the government’s agents goes further. Here, the narrator presents a fearless and merciless dictator called Fifo (a humorous and obvious reference to Fidel Castro), who is motivated by his inescapable sexual desire. At the end of the novel, Fifo is haunted

by the dissatisfaction of his own sexual needs. Leaving the island in a hot-air balloon, he sees people below and feels aroused and again frustrated for not being able “to possess” or “be possessed” by someone:

Así, nuestro hombre [Fifo] no halló paz en la tierra. Cuando veía a una hermosa mujer se apasionaba, cuando veía a un hombre se desmayaba de deseos y cuando veía a una loca se inflamaba de rubor bugarronil. Y lo peor era que cuando poseía a un hombre quería poseer a la madre de aquel efebo y cuando poseía a la mujer quería ser poseído por el hermano de la misma, y cuando finalmente llegaba a ser poseído por el hermano deseaba poseer al padre de la criatura que lo poseía. Nada lo satisfacía, nada lo colmaba. A veces, por consejos de la Paula Amanda, organizaba múltiples orgías. De esta manera, él en el centro (como le recomendaba la Paula) podía disfrutar de templar y ser templado a la vez. Pero ni modo: Hallándose en el centro de la cadena sexual quería ser el último o el primero. Y la cadena se rompía violentamente, y el pobre hombre no hallaba paz alguna. (412)

[And so our little man [Fifo] had no peace upon this earth. When he saw a good looking woman he would grow impassioned, when he saw a man he would become almost faint, and when he spotted a fairy he would grow inflamed with thoughts of bugging. And the worst thing was that when he was screwing a man he wanted to be screwing the mother of that glorious ephebe, and when he was screwing a woman he wanted to be taken by the woman's bother, and when he finally was being screwed by the woman's brother he wanted to screw the father of the hunk who was screwing him. Nothing satisfied him; nothing fulfilled him. Sometimes, on the advice of Paula Amanda, he would host multiorgies. That way, as he sat (so to speak) in the center of the action (as Paula Amanda had recommended), as he took his place at the midpoint of the daisy chain, he could enjoy screwing and being screwed at the same time. But not even that worked – when he was at the center of the daisy chain he'd want to be the first one in it, or sometimes the last. So the chain would come apart (and not so easily, either, sugar) and the poor man would find no solace. (379)]

The fact that “Fifo” Castro embodies a voracious sexual desire with no distinction for men or women and with a predilection for “locas” (fairy, fags) grants to the text a corporeal-political dimension. The description of both Fidel and Raúl “Kastro”<sup>23</sup> in the novel is connected to the way in which homoerotic desire contests the regime with the same weapons: If homosexual activity is

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<sup>23</sup> In the novel, Fifo also has a brother called “Raúl Kastro”. By the end of the text, Raúl greets Fifo leaving the island in the hot-air balloon and announces him that he, Raúl, has made justice for him, killing all of his most noble friends and that now he awaits to be acclaimed as the heir. The narrator, within Fifo's mind, says the following: “¡Ella! ¡Ella! Pensó Fifo viendo a Raúl Kastro con sus atuendos rojos sobre la máquina de guerra. Ella al menos sabe lo que quiere y lo consigue. Se ha pasado a todo mi ejército por el culo.” (413) [Just look at Raúl in that red getup of hers! thought Fifo. She at least knows what she wants and goes after it. She's had every man in my army up her ass. (380)]

oppressed (especially the “passive” role), Arenas makes the Castros thirsty “locas” for homosexual intercourse. His texts subverts the discourse of power by putting the government’s heads as desiring (homo)sexual bodies. In this way, Arenas presents a “revolution within the Revolution”, since homosexuality seems to be revolutionary in Cuba (Epps 231). Arenas’ most important arms lay in making Castro a “paradigmatic object of desire” (Epps 271), as well as a desiring (homosexual) subject.

The way in which Arenas depicts homosexuality, desire, and the (homo)erotization of the communist government’s agents reveals his texts’ aim to disclose major contradictions in the Revolution’s discourse: The revolution has not reached everyone; the revolution is more revolutionary for some than for others; there is still some remains of bourgeois morality within the Revolution. Guy Hocquenghem affirms that the mode in which we consider desire is based in “male domination” (49), which implies a “phallic society” and, in relation to the phallus, a determined quantity of possible pleasure (96). Hocquenghem’s point is to show how the political organization of the body is centered around the phallus, making the phallus essentially social and the anus, essentially private (96). In order to carry out a “revolution”, Hocquenghem explains, what needs to be de-privatized is the anus, since the control of the anus is the control of private property (99). That is why homosexuality remains threatening: “Homosexual desire challenges anality-sublimation because it restores the desiring use of the anus” (98). The desiring anus would provoke the collapse of the phallic hierarchy, something that Arenas’ clearly pursues. Hocquenghem’s reading of leftist movements and their conception of homosexuality can explain Arenas’ idea of overthrowing Castro’s dominance by eroticizing the anus (by making him the “passive” *marica*):

We must give up the dream of reconciling the official spokesmen of revolution to the expression of desire. We cannot force desire to identify with a revolution which is already

so heavy with the past history of the "workers' movement". Revolutionary demands must be derived from the very movement of desire; it isn't only a new revolutionary model that is needed, but a new questioning of the content traditionally associated with the term "revolution", particularly the notion of the seizure of power. (Hocquenghem 135)

Clearly, Arenas' texts reconceptualize revolution itself by investing the agents of the revolution with a homoerotic desire and making them participants of homosexual encounters, something that they themselves have repressed in their own revolutionary government. Indeed, the problem does not lie in the constitution of desire (something that overcomes identities, policies, restrictions, etc.), but in the idea of "revolution" itself.

Beatriz Preciado, continuing the discussion started by Hocquenghem, explains that a "castrated anus" (an anus that does not explore its erotic possibilities) is a sign of a heterosexual regime. It is the "closet of the heterosexual" (*Terror anal*, 138). Her text also points out the struggles experienced by some revolutionary movements. She explains:

La revolución no la hacen los mejores, ni la hacen siempre por las mejores razones. Además, todo movimiento revolucionario tiene su jefe de marketing: aquellos que labelizan un bloque revolucionario y designan quiénes pertenecen y quiénes no pertenecen a él. Conclusión: Las revoluciones también construyen sus propios márgenes. Corolario: la revolución no había llegado todavía a su estadio anal. (142)

[The revolution is not made by the best, and it is not made always for the best reasons. In addition, every revolutionary movement has its marketing manager: those that label a revolutionary block and designate who belongs and who does not belong to it. Conclusion: revolutions also construct their own margins. Corollary: the revolution had not yet arrived at its anal stage.]

For Preciado, the revolution consists of opening the social prison of the anus. According to her, a series of processes have domesticated sexual desire through punishments and rewards. This has caused a gradual closure of the anus and its erotic potentiality. The revolution then implies opening up the anus of the (social) body (153). For her, the problem is not anal sex per se, but the "civilization" of the anally-castrated-men (161), the naturalization of such men deprived of their

own anal sexual capacities. The revolution consists, then, of making the anus a space free of social “imprisonment”.

Arenas’ configuration of homoeroticism as something that happens through the anus<sup>24</sup> (especially when he recounts his first time being penetrated (*Antes que anochezca* 95)) and the inclusion of government officials in homosexual activity (even the Castros in *El color del verano*), make his texts an active element that contributes to the “anal” revolution explained by Hocquenghem and Preciado. According to the latter, queer theory comes from activism, since it cannot be described only as a theoretical and academic background but also as a “radical questioning of production modes of subjectivity in capitalist modernity” (Preciado 150).

Then, if Arenas’ texts are “queer”<sup>25</sup> in some manner, they would be in the way in which they carry on an activist gesture. The (homo)erotization of the macho’s anus grants his texts a corporeal way to subvert an oppressive discourse of power, which can be seen as an activist “queer” quality. Arenas’ work does not only “disclose the *loca* in the macho” (Kaebrick 103), nor does it embody the macho with a queer desire (Kaebrick 107). It also radicalizes the erotization of the anus, which ultimately questions the deep configuration of the concept of “revolution.” Homo-anal-desire in Arenas’ work clearly threatens Castro’s government, the discourse of the inherited machismo, and above all, the concept of “revolution” itself.

### **Displaying Desiring (Homo)Erotic Bodies: Marco Berger’s *Plan B***

Continuing with the conceptualization of desire as a means to defy a discourse of power, the construction of a (homo)erotic sexual tension questions the validity of sexual categories and/or

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<sup>24</sup> Regarding this topic within the Latin American context, Alaguer explains: “It is the mapping of the body into differentiated erotic zones and the unequal, gender-coded statuses accorded sexual actors that structure homosexual meaning in Latin culture.” (257)

<sup>25</sup> Cft. Alarcón-Negy, Alma. “¿Qué posee de queer la autobiografía areniana *Antes que anochezca*?”.

their very existence in the case of Marco Berger's film *Plan B* (2009). The film problematizes any type of legitimized social categorization related to sexualities. Berger's films aim to capture, above all, the growing sexual attraction between his main characters. In *Plan B* particularly, the camera observes the protagonists' bodies, Bruno and Pablo, with close attention in several scenes. While the characters gradually get to know each other, the camera shows their semi-naked resting bodies, in long takes, while they sleep together. In this way, the film develops a growing sensation of sexual desire by using certain camera angles (the camera at the same level as the bed), shots (the "Berger" shots that depict a young man's crotch), and timing (the bodies suspended in long takes). The results could be described as a (homo)erotization of the cinematographic image that intends to break the consolidation of heteronormative conceptions of sexuality.

The film tells the story of Bruno, who wants to get back his ex-girlfriend, Laura. However, Laura has a new relationship with Pablo and does not want to be with Bruno any longer. Later, he hears a rumor that Pablo may have had a sexual encounter with another man in the past, which makes him design a new plan: To seduce Pablo so he leaves Laura and thus allowing Bruno to be with her again. But as in many other romantic comedies, the seducer becomes seduced, with Bruno falling in love with Pablo, and Pablo falling for Bruno as well.

One of the most important aspects of the film is that the idea of "self-discovering homosexual" is neither a determinate factor nor an obstacle: The characters do not question their desires by imposing previous conceptions on sexual identities. The fact that they consider themselves "heterosexuals" at the beginning does not prevent them from feeling attracted to each other. During the film, homosexuality appears in the form of jokes and games, but it does not acquire a transcendental dramatic level that impacts the development of the plot. In other words,

Bruno and Pablo do not seem to become distressed by experiencing their (homo)erotic desire. As

Foster (2014) explains:

Los films de Berger se enfocan en circunstancias en que dos individuos de pronto se enfrentan con el potencial de la experiencia homoerótica, a veces a contrapelo de su conciencia, contradiciendo su alegada heterosexualidad. No es que estos individuos “descubran” que son “en realidad” gay. Más bien, llegan a descubrir un campo más amplio de potencial erótico para sus cuerpos de lo que habían, hasta este punto, imaginado.

[Berger's films focus on the circumstances in which two individuals are suddenly confronted with the potential of a homoerotic experience, sometimes against their consciousness, contradicting their alleged heterosexuality. It is not that these individuals “discover” that they “actually” are gay. Rather, they end up discovering a wider field of erotic potential for their bodies than they ever, up to that point, imagined.]

If an imposed and strict categorization of sexual identities does not become a central element in the film, gender performance does. Both of the main characters are inscribed in a specific social space, with specific idioms, gestures, clothing, and other characteristics that seem to refer to a certain, almost stereotyped form of Argentine masculinity: “el pibe de barrio” [“(neighbor)hood’s boy”]. This interpretation of masculinity is essential because the film questions the rigidity of a heteronormative conception of sexual desire. Both Bruno and Pablo do not leave Buenos Aires’ outskirts. They meet at the gym, and they spend time on a building’s terrace dressed in soccer jerseys, with uncombed hair and using slang words such as “chabón” (“dude”), “posta” (“seriously”), or “loco” (literally, “crazy”, meaning “dude”). The film displays an idea of masculinity that belongs to the urban Argentine imagination (the city of Buenos Aires, more specifically) and confronts it with an unexpected homoerotic desire. Pedro analyzes Berger’s filmography and highlights the recurrence of homoerotism in spaces typically assigned to the (heterosexual) Argentine masculinity:

En los personajes de estos filmes, no se asocia el desvío del deseo heteronormativo con falta de hombría o de virilidad. Tampoco se vincula el deseo homoerótico con la sensibilidad o el mundo artístico, ni se vuelve necesario explicar la etiología de los deseos disidentes de los personajes, generalmente asociados, en muchos otros filmes, a relaciones

edípicas patológicas sostenidas desde elementos apropiados de la psiquiatría o el psicoanálisis (48).

[In the characters of these films, the drifting of heteronormative desire is not associated with a lack of manliness or virility. Homoerotic desire is neither linked to sensibility or to the artistic world, nor is it necessary to explain the etiology of the characters' dissident desires, generally associated, in many other films, to pathological oedipal relationships maintained from elements appropriated by Psychiatry or Psychoanalysis.]

The clash between homoerotic desire and masculine performative gender<sup>26</sup> (“porteño”<sup>27</sup> and “del barrio”) is a recurrent factor in Berger's films. In *Plan B*, the verisimilar development of the characters' relationship is also sustained by shared experiences from their childhood. Because a self-defined sexual identity and preference that designate a preconceived sexual desire remain mostly ignored in the film, Berger explores other areas to create the development of an erotic attraction. For Berger, childhood's memories are important to construct desire, as they expose the main characters' sensibility and connect them emotionally. Since Pablo and Bruno seem to have grown up in the same sociocultural context, they share similar memories that come up during some dialogues: They refer to Peter Pan, to toys such as *rastis* (similar to Legos), and to other experiences like sleepovers at a friend's house. In this way, Berger's films pay special attention to the growing homoerotization of the spaces of friendship socially assigned to heterosexual masculinity.

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<sup>26</sup> In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explores the constitution and sustainability of what we know as gender. By referring to J. L. Austin's speech acts, Butler develops a theory in which she postulates gender (male/female) as a performance, as a meaningful act that acquires semantic and identity power as long as it is performed. For Butler, gender is a performance, a construction that in its permanent repetition, and reproduction hides its genesis. There is a tacit and collective agreement that legitimizes the “feminine” in one way and the “masculine” in another, which also hides its fictional character. Butler reveals an arbitrary linearity that the heteronormative discourse of power has established: those born with a penis will be assigned a male gender (which implies certain gestures, way of talking, dressing, etc.) and hence, a heterosexually imposed sexuality, meaning, to desire an individual of the opposite sex (in this case, a woman). If gender is a fiction, a mere theatrical act repeated and established, that defines behavior, the entire linearity and essentialism of the heteronormative discourse are also fictitious.

<sup>27</sup> “Porteño” refers to people that live in the city of Buenos Aires.



Since many aspects that define the characters seem to contradict the growing sexual tension that they experience, the film reveals the idea that desire overcomes preconceived categorizations. In this way, *Plan B* exposes the conception of sexuality as a construct legitimized by social norms. In order to make this idea even more evident, Berger's film utilizes multiple images that emphasize construction as a parallel for the development of oneself. For example, in various scenes, the characters speak about toys with which they used to play. When Bruno asks Pablo "¿Qué juguete serías si fueses uno? [What kind of toy would you be if you were one?], Pablo responds, "Un balde y una palita" [A bucket and a little shovel]. Later, he adds: "Porque te podés llenar de cosas. Porque te podés construir" [Because you can fill yourself with things. Because you can build yourself]. Being that the movie is about the homoerotic relationship between two self-identified heterosexual men, the idea of "building" oneself expressed in this line appeals to the concept of constructing one's own sexuality or sexual identity. In this way, it establishes a strong connection between the toy (a symbol of childhood) and what seems to define the self in adulthood (sexuality). The volubility or plasticity of childhood (the formation of the self) allows one to envisage adult identities as also being voluble or more fluid (one can also construct oneself in adulthood). This is later confirmed when Bruno gives Pablo a bucket and a shovel as a gift and tells him "Yo estoy ahí" [I am there]. This is not only an act of seduction, but also an invitation to continue "building" oneself, to allow oneself to experience sexual desire differently from preconceived categories.

Another strategy used to develop and emphasize the idea of sexuality as a construction is the repeated visual images of different buildings in Buenos Aires. For example, by the end of the film, the camera shows the main characters in long shots, alone and in silence, with the city of Buenos Aires as a background. More emphatically, the camera captures Bruno in a close-up and later focuses on the building under construction behind, and then, back to Bruno. In this way, the

films shows a parallelism that expresses that both the building and Bruno are under construction (see Figures 22 and 23).



Figures 22 and 23: Buildings of Buenos Aires; building oneself.

Another important aspect of Berger's film consists of the deceleration of the action when the camera focuses on details specific to bodies (in bed, bathing, meditating, or waiting). Its interest seems to be on capturing the characters' internal processes that appear externally in subtle gestures or looks. Using long takes of the characters and focusing on their corporality are both ways of revealing Bruno's and Pablo's internal world and construction of their growing sexual tension.

The particular use of time may imply an ideological perspective because it seems to entail a certain form of reception. In his analysis of the ideological connections between cinematographic form and industry, Jean Louis Comolli observes that in France, for example, a 90 minutes TV film is subjected to strict regulations that require no less than 1200 shots, which means an overall duration of four seconds per shot (124). According to Comolli, the cinematographic industry imposes the creation of "effect addicts," who get impatient when watching non-promotional or industrial cinema. This over-consumption of images denies the possibility of contemplation in cinema. When a film presents takes of a longer duration than those stipulated by the film industry's language, spectators interact differently with cinema in a more active manner. Spectators "inhabit" the image, contemplate, and think, because they have the time to do so. As Comolli explains it, those takes of longer duration cause viewers to be "within themselves," to "throw" themselves

“into the image.” This sort of cinema (“the cinema of contemplation”) becomes a threatening language for the capitalist film market. He affirms:

El plano precipitado se desembaraza de mí antes de que yo tenga tiempo de embarazarme por su causa. Cerrado, pasa frente a mí como una flecha. Un plano que dura, en cambio, me pesa ante todo como una restricción y, por durar, se abre a continuación a mi presencia y me deja habitarlo con mi fantasía (que puede ser también la de escapar a su influjo). (121)

[The hasty shot gets rid of myself before I have the time to become hampered by its reason. Closed, it passes in front of me as an arrow. A shot that lasts, instead, weighs in me above all as a restriction and, because it lasts, opens a continuation to my presence and allows me to inhabit it with my fantasy (which could also be that of escaping from its influence).]

The duration of films then becomes political, because lengthening a take for the spectator’s contemplation means to give him or her the chance to participate in the film actively. As Comolli explains, an active spectator may be able to “emancipate” him/herself from the repetitive format of the industrial cinematic language. In this sense, Berger breaks some of the hegemonic stipulations that determine the process of editing and the duration of takes.

In *Plan B*, the length of the takes gives the film the chance to tell the story by the use of details (Pablo’s subtle smile, Bruno’s looks and silences, etc.), and also develops a (homo)erotic desire between the characters by showing intimate moments in long shots. Some of these moments happen when they sleep together (the camera captures both semi-naked resting bodies in bed), have intimate conversations, or just remain silent and look at each other. Then, the particular use of timing in the film sustains a growing sexual tension; a theme that can be found in other of Berger’s productions. As Peidro explains:

La presencia constante de un deseo homoerótico no sólo se evidencia en los diálogos o las miradas, sino que en muchos de estos filmes hay una exacerbada presencia del calor, de cuerpos sudados, agua y piscinas donde las prendas de vestir sobran y los cuerpos se muestran apenas cubiertos, dispuestos como objetos de deseo, aunque siempre justificadamente (48).

[The constant presence of a homoerotic desire is not only demonstrated by dialogues or looks, but in most of these films there is an exacerbated presence of heat, sweating bodies, water and pools where clothing are not needed and bodies are barely covered, arranged as objects of desire, although always justified.]

*Plan B* lacks swimming pools, but it provides scenes in showers, lockers, and Bruno's bed where both characters spend several nights almost naked. Thus, by suspending these bodies in time, i.e. long takes, the film develops a sense of desire that transcends the screen and may appeal to the spectator. As Foster explains, Berger's cinematography refers to a meticulous attention to details of a homoerotic dynamic. In fact, the sexual encounter itself is suppressed during the film, which keeps the spectator's attention on the process of seduction and attraction (Foster 2014).

Timing, though, is not the only element in *Plan B* that constructs the sense of a developing sexual tension, which ultimately breaks with heteronormative linearity. As in other Berger's films, semi-naked bodies appear many times on the screen; however, there is a specific body area to which the camera pays attention: The man's crotch.

This fragmentation or visual emphasis is what Peidro calls the "plano Berger" (Berger shot): "Se trata de una imagen que a veces es presentada en plano fijo, otras como parte de la misma secuencia en movimiento, pero donde siempre se trata de un primer plano de la zona genital de un varón joven. [It is an image that sometimes is presented in a fixed shot, other times as part of a moving sequence, but it always consists of a close up of the genital zone of a young man]" (50).

Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) initiated an important discussion when she exposed and described the concept of a "male gaze"<sup>28</sup> in films; a

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<sup>28</sup> Mulvey denounces a configuration of women in Hollywood cinema, who were displayed as objects of desire or an object of punishment. Mulvey's contribution can be summarized in the discovering of a male gaze that is translated into certain cinematographic techniques: a woman displayed for the contemplation of a man, hence the camera, hence the audience that watch the film. The discursive power of cinema consists in looking at women as objects of desire or punishment, to which the camera is totally disposed. The audience passively accepts the role of the male

concept later adopted by other areas of cultural research such as Queer Studies. This helps to understand some of the formal aspects of *Plan B*, like the “Berger shot” (see Figure 24). According to Julia Erharts, although Dyer’s study<sup>29</sup> on the objectification of the male body was a pioneer, it



Figure 24: The Berger Shot.

was Doty’s book *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) that shaped the concept of a “queer gaze.” Doty especially explores the modes in which “queerness” appears and qualifies popular cinema. He proposes that queerness may emerge as a response by a particular audience when watching a film with a specific imaginary. This means that queerness may appear in the interaction between (1) an audience self-identified as lesbian, gay or queer with queer and non-queer texts. Also, it appears in the interaction between (2) an audience self-identified as heterosexual and gay, lesbian,

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character to which it identifies and observes with him. Mulvey explains: “The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle” (2187). This is achieved, according to Mulvey, by putting a male character with which the audience identifies. “Para Mulvey, tanto la forma del discurso narrativo como la economía escópica del texto fílmico están marcados por [una] división, que funcionaliza la diferencia sexual a las exigencias de nuestra sociedad capitalista, patriarcal y sexista” [For Mulvey, both the form of narrative discourse and the scopic economy of the film text are marked by a division, that functionalizes the sexual difference to the demands of our capitalist, patriarchal, and sexist society.] (Colaizzi 193).

<sup>29</sup> “Don’t Look Now: The Instabilities of the Male Pin-Up” (1982).

or queer images. Hence, queerness is not a character assumed by the audience nor the film, but rather occurs in the interaction. To make Doty's point more evident, Erharts explains:

Queerness could materialize regardless of the self-termed identity of a viewer or the socially recognized gayness of the object viewed. Queerness was no longer experienced solely by self-declared queers watching "out" texts, but was produced within and circulated by so-called "straight" culture too. (175)

Doty's contribution permits the opening of the constraints between straight and gay categories in film studies. This means that queerness consists in a particular interrelationship between spectators and the cinematographic text, beyond any self-denomination of those that watch the films. In this sense, the particular use of timing in Berger's film and the special attention to the male genital area (the "Berger shot") entail a certain interaction between the film and spectators: The latter would experience/perceive a growing sexual tension and (homo)erotic desire. Then, it is possible to wonder: How would the audience interact with this sensation? Would someone question his/her own conception of sexuality and sexual desire? Does this become a way to counteract the dominance of a heteronormative linearity and the rigidity of sexual categories? These are certainly the questions that the film proposes.

If Mulvey referred to a "male gaze," then the concept of a "queer gaze"<sup>30</sup> may be applicable to the depiction of the fragmented male body and the display of sexual attraction in Berger's film since these techniques show desire as something that overcomes fixed categories and presents sexuality as a more fluid condition. The sexual tension that the bodies in the film develop also appeals to the audience's perception of sexual attraction. It is possible to affirm that desire challenges strict conceptions of sexual categories within the film (the characters' own sexual discovery) and this could also make the audience question their own.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Evans, Caroline and Gamman, Lorraine. "The Gaze Revisited, or Reviewing Queer Viewing". Cf. Bad Object-Choices. *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. Cf. Waugh, Thomas. *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*.

As Peidro states, “existe una clara dirección de interpelación hacia el espectador, para ahorrarle la comodidad de habitar la seguridad de los géneros, las eróticas, los sexos y los deseos culturalmente hegemónicos” [there exists a clear direction of interpellation towards the spectator, to prevent him from the comfort of inhabiting the security of the genders, the erotics, the sexes and the culturally hegemonic desires] (49). Furthermore, as Foster explains, “aunque estamos acostumbrados al cuerpo de la mujer como fetiche, obligar al espectador a enfocarse en el cuerpo de madurez sexual de un hombre todavía es, esencialmente, *queer*.” [although we are used to the woman’s body as fetish, forcing the spectator to focus on the body of a sexually-mature man is still, essentially, *queer*.]

The position of the camera, then, highlights the film’s intention to make the audience part of the experience. When resting on the bed, the camera is located at the same level, as if the audience were also there. This formal decision challenges spectators by making them part of an eroticized moment. Although the characters still seem to remain ignorant of their own desire, the position of the camera in addition to the length of takes and close-ups of their crotches make the spectator aware of a growing sexual tension.

Sexuality is a construct since desire transcends the limitations imposed for a body by the heteronormative discourse of power. The characters never modify their behavior or their way of talking and dressing – their gender performance. They only acknowledge an attraction that overcomes certain fixed modes of categorized identities and they feel it entirely.

### **The Politics of Queer Desire and the Aroused Body**

When Llamas refers to the politics of sexuality, he points out that “algunas personas son más cuerpo que otras” [some people are “more body” than other] (142) and affirms that these more incarnated individuals usually belong to marginalized, exploited, and oppressed communities. This

extra-corporalization implies the loss of liberty and autonomy for these people, which ultimately benefits those that can exercise a “complete humanity” (142). The homosexual desiring body, the corporeal representation that somewhat unites the three works analyzed in this chapter, belongs to these more embodied communities that remain marginalized and controlled. The fact that homosexual bodies appear reduced to their physical acts, which seem to define their interiority and their souls, can be framed as a form of cultural subjugation. The homosexual body becomes, then, a “hyperbody” (149) –as Llamas calls it – that cannot function as a complete human being. However, as is possible to observe in the analyzed works, “es desde el cuerpo desde donde debe lucharse [...] contra los criterios de reducción discriminatoria y dominación” [the body is from where one has to fight ... against the discriminatory criteria and domination.] (142)

The political statements that each artwork makes regarding their own social and political contexts can be observed in the ways they represent desire. The homosexual desiring bodies are the means to make such statements perceivable/understandable. The texture of these artworks consists in the configuration of desire as a sensation/concept that transcends all forms of limitations, boundaries, and constraints imposed by a discourse of power (heteronormativity/patriarchy). Texture can also allow different subjects to interact beyond such social norms or nationalistic ideals that attempt to separate one from another.

Despite the diverse contexts of production that have had an important impact on the different films and autobiography analyzed in this chapter, Sheridan, Berger and Arenas’ works all depict the (homo)sexual body as a political tool with which to challenge pre-established notions and social norms. In the case of *Borstal Boy*, Sheridan utilizes sexual desire as a means to defy both heteronormative and nationalistic discourses. By making young Brendan Behan feel attracted to an English fellow, the film demonstrates through homosexual desire the potential to overcome



strict categorizations. Sexual attraction overcomes nationalistic and sexual boundaries by showing a young IRA man falling for an English sailor. In this way, *Borstal Boy* shows, above all, the Irish sociopolitical context at the beginning of the twenty-first century; a time in which different political and economic circumstances gave people the chance to re-define their own social identity.

Similar to Sheridan's film, Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography makes sexual desire an element to respond to imposed social norms. Although Arenas' Cuba differs from Sheridan's Ireland, it is possible to observe in the use of homosexual desire a similar strategy to overcome fixed boundaries and to challenge a certain discourse of power. In this case, *Antes que anochezca* presents homoeroticism in certain patriarchal contexts and figures that define masculinity for the Revolution. For Arenas, the Revolution's strong persecution of homosexuality can be defied by making homosexual desire appear in areas specifically designated for revolutionary men. Moreover, Arenas shows such homoerotic attraction as something experienced by these so-called "revolutionary masculine" men: Marxist professors, peasants harvesting sugarcane, the guards in the prison, etc. More emphatically, Arenas challenges patriarchal impositions by making these same characters feel and act (homo)sexual arousal. Arenas also subverts the politics of the body and uses it to disrupt the dominance of patriarchy by making the anus an space of significance. In this way, *Antes que anochezca* presents a revolution within the Revolution since it exposes Castro's regimes own contradictions: The revolution has not reached everyone. Arenas' use of the anus as part of the sexual act and desire emphasizes this aspect.

Finally, in *Plan B*, Berger also makes use of homoerotic desire as a means to challenge a discourse of power. The film shows a growing sexual tension that makes two self-defined heterosexual men feel attracted to each other. In this way, *Plan B* questions the validity of heteronormative categorizations and makes the main characters experience desire as something

that goes beyond imposed sexual identities. The film seems to advocate for the idea that sexuality can be conceived as a flowing and gradual construction and desire as something that overcomes any forms of categorization.

In all of these artworks, the political (homo)sexual corporeality defines not only their *locus*, the place from which they decide to speak, but also the element that they aim to defend. Their means to contest the discourse of power and domination is desire. The configuration of a (homosexual) desire that transgresses any sort of boundaries (nationalistic, sexual identities, ideological) is the central strategy. The homoerotic desiring and aroused bodies become extremely political in the sense that they have been reduced to a carnal condition potentially exposed to subjugation. However, at the same time, they are used as means to regain a space of existence other than the material or physical; an act that in the end makes them more human.

### CHAPTER 3: THE BODY IN PAIN, THE BODY AS WEAPON. STATE APPARATUSES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF PAIN AND TORTURE.

In the introduction of his book *Historia cultural del dolor* [*Cultural History of Pain*], Javier Moscoso observes that, despite the differences, pain's historical variations and diverse social conceptions maintain common elements through time and space. If we consider that pain becomes a "social drama," something understood and felt under certain modes by communities and conceived by certain constructed conceptions, then there will be a common structure that keeps framing the way we think and feel pain. This, he affirms, "implica reconocer que, con independencia de sus expresiones culturales, hay una forma aprendida y constante de viajar por la senda del sufrimiento y enfrentarse a la experiencia del daño" [it implies to recognize that, independently of its cultural expressions, there is one learned and constant way to travel by the path of suffering and to confront the experience of harm] (19). According to Moscoso, pain has a "dynamic structure", because it includes a moment of break or rupture, which demands repair. Whoever suffers pain lives in a "liminal space" between "separation" and "reconciliation." Feeling pain implies the hope and demand of its cessation. "Liminality" or "transience", for Moscoso, defines pain in all its cultural representations beyond time and space. One can affirm then that pain has a dual nature because it reveals the sentient skin of the sufferer and its necessity to be relieved.

In the fictional works analyzed in this chapter (Néstor Perlongher's short story "El informe Grossman" ["Grossman's Report"] (2009);<sup>31</sup> Paula Markovitch's film *El premio* [*The Prize*] (2011); Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002); and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena* [*The Last Supper*] (1976)), the physical sensation of pain will be explored as both a personal and social drama. All those who suffer pain expose their individual experience as the

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<sup>31</sup> For this particular text, there is no a specific year of composition. Despite my efforts, I could not find more information regarding the year that Perlongher wrote and published this short story. I take 2009, the year of publication of *Evita vive y otros cuentos*, which is the edition I refer in this dissertation.

metonymy of the one lived by a social body. The communal character of their suffering derives from the strong political criticism that these artworks intend to address: the exposure of the violent mechanism with which State apparatuses operate on the body. The Army, the Church, the Family, and the School are some of the apparatuses studied in this chapter. These cinematic and literary works present them as institutions whose mechanisms of discipline and control of bodies could be defined as purely violent. If one goes beyond the historical contexts in which the films and short story were produced or to which they refer, it is possible to observe a common mode that aids in understanding the relationship between the human body and State apparatuses: State control inflicts pain on the body. State presence implies suffering for the skin; and this seems to remain as a social injury revisited by other generations. Whether it is a dictatorial government in the Argentina of the 1970s, the strong moral control by the Church and Family in the 1960s Ireland, or slavery sustained by a religious discourse in colonial Cuba, the mode through which ideology and State control are imposed become strongly violent for the body.

The films and the short story analyzed in this chapter do not represent pain as a passive sensation encapsulated in the personal experience. Pain is also something active, because, as Moscoso explains, it demands a repair. At the same time that it exposes suffering, pain requires acknowledgment and relief. In the case of the artworks analyzed, I observe that this dynamics could be found in the way in which the body in pain is represented:

- The body becomes first a surface of inscription for the violent administration of State control.
- But, by revealing the forceful character of State apparatuses, the body in pain also becomes a political device that enables it to discursively “fight back”.

Pain has an ambivalent structure, because at the same time that it presents the body as passively enduring suffering, it exposes the violent mechanism of ideology and State control. Beyond their historical and aesthetic differences, this political function could be encountered in all

the artworks analyzed in this chapter. The social wounds that these artworks present are still open and enduring, and still demand repair and reconciliation. As we will see, it is not a coincidence that the films and literary work selected for this chapter refer to past events in their national history (the last dictatorship in Argentina, the Malvinas/Falkland Islands war, the 1960s in Ireland and the “architecture of containment,” and the colonial era and slavery in Cuba). They observe from a contemporary context the violent mode in which State apparatuses have operated on the body in order to expose social failures and prevent them from happening again. What they reveal in the end is not only that the human body is the material with which State works, but also the last individual bastion from where one can fight back.

In this sense, texture becomes this sentient/conceptual dimension to which all artworks refer. Pain becomes a corporeal means to make a certain political statement something perceivable and understandable. How to return to historical wounds if it is not through the body? These artworks expose past social violence by making pain a constant and very present feeling/idea.

In this chapter I first analyze Néstor Perlongher’s short story “El informe Grossman”, which situates pain and torture in close contact with sexual pleasure. By fictionalizing a collection of testimonies of homosexual soldiers who “fought” in the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands War in 1982, Perlongher exposes and ridicules the violent and patriarchal character of the Army. In the story, the soldiers describe their experiences during the war. They present the defeat of the Argentine armed forces and the torture they endured after the British agents and Gurkha soldiers, a special Nepalese force, took over. However, the entire war, soldiers, and torture are mocked. What they “suffer” is a constant and group sexual abuse; a homosexual orgy that it seems they suffer from as much as they enjoy. The body in pain here remains in a liminal space between pain and pleasure. The Argentine soldiers speak about their sexual training, how they satisfy others’

drives, and how they live the defeat by enduring the British and Gurkha sexual needs. The orgiastic acts that take place in the short story emulate painful processes of torture. Perlongher's homosexual and ironic perspective on the Army and the war intends to attack the patriarchal character and violent operations of the dictatorial government, applied to the whole social body during the 1970s and 1980s.

Second, this chapter continues focusing on the last dictatorship in Argentina by analyzing Paula Markovitch's film *El premio*. The movie centers on the life of Cecilia, a little girl who stays with her mother in a small abandoned shack by the beach in San Clemente, south of the province of Buenos Aires. They have run away and hidden from the dictatorial government because Cecilia's parents seem to be involved in political activism. After a while, Cecilia starts attending a local school with her mother's advice of not telling anyone about her real identity. Markovitch's own experience during the years of the Argentine dictatorship shapes the main interest of the film: To depict the violent experience of this regime from the perspective of a little girl and to portray the School as another State apparatus that functioned ideologically close to the dictatorial government by imposing control and discipline through physical pain. Indeed, the entire plot and the deployment of the story are completely shown from Cecilia's point of view. This can be seen not only in the configuration of dialogues or the construction of the characters, but also in the camera's positions and visual construction of specific shots. The body also participates as an important element that shapes Cecilia's own experience. Although she seems unable completely to comprehend what is happening around her, she encounters violence and suffers pain in her daily life. Evoked through either visual or sonorous images, pain appears as a constant sensation that covers all social interaction, as a permanent presence that seems silently to approach throughout the film. Cecilia's body endures pain and she lives her reality as it were a constant process of

torture. In this way, Markovitch's film constructs the dictatorial experience as if something lived through the body, as a painful presence experienced by all sectors of society.

Third, I analyze Peter Mullan's second film *The Magdalene Sisters*. This movie tells the story of four young girls in Dublin during the 1960s who work in one of the laundries run by a religious order. Although these institutions were created to help women to escape prostitution or extreme poverty, the film depicts the laundries as functioning as prisons for all women that do not fit into the strict conservative Christian morality of the time. Being a single mother, a victim of sexual assault, or too pretty to be left alone around boys, are reasons enough to commit young women to these institutions. The film exposes a strong affiliation of different apparatuses that work together to impose this morality as social law: the Church, the Police, and the Family. By telling the story of these four fictional characters, although inspired by real events, Mullan's cinematic work reveals the patriarchal and violent mechanism with which the entire social framework functioned at this time in Irish history. The movie appeared in a moment of gradual decline for the Church in Ireland after a series of scandals in the 1990s, and some years before the conclusion and publication of the Report made by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (also known as the Ryan Report). All of the different types of abuses later explained by this Report can be found in the film: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. In this way, the film depicts the violent administration of the body as a main concern and priority for the religious discourse and the Church. Mullan's movie then participates in the cultural production that intends to deconstruct the power of the religious discourse in the configuration of Irish national identity at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a moment of social reconstruction and economic growth.

Finally, the analysis of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena* continues the discussion of the religious discourse and its role as a violent mechanism of control applied on the human body. The film tells the story of a group of slaves living in a sugar plantation at the end of the eighteenth century in Cuba. During Easter week, the plantation owner, a pious Spanish count, decides to recreate the Biblical last supper using twelve slaves. He explains from his Christian conceptions how physical pain is the only individual possession that one has to gladly offer to God. The film exposes how religious discourse approved the violent mechanism to make slavery function. Like other productions at the time, such as Sergio Giral's *El otro Francisco* (1974) or Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (1974), Gutiérrez Alea makes a film that strengthens the Afro-Cuban religion, culture, and history as an important element for the Revolution. As in previously analyzed works in this chapter, the film configures the body not only as the space for the violent inscription of ideology and apparatuses, but also as the sentient mode to expose this mechanism and fight back.

### **Eroticizing Torture and the Repressive State Apparatus: Néstor Perlongher's "El informe Grossman"**

For the Argentine writer Néstor Perlongher, desire and politics were always tied together. From his very first interventions as an activist in the leftist movements in the 1970s, including his transcendental participation in the Frente de Liberación Homosexual [Homosexual Liberation Front], to his last published texts at the end of his life, Perlongher never separated his interests of homosexual desire and identity with political activity and ideology. For him, the politics of desire were a "revolutionary tool" that in that particular context "became almost impossible" (Rapisardi and Moradelli 156). Perlongher's writing happened in a politically convulsive time: He witnessed the return of Juan Perón at Ezeiza airport and the following violent attacks, Perón's third presidency, his death, the coup d'état, the dictatorial government from 1976 to 1983, the Malvinas



War, and the return of democracy. Like many other writers and thinkers, after graduating from Universidad de Buenos Aires, Perlongher was exiled in 1981 to Sao Paulo, Brasil, where he remained until his death in 1992. Both in his personal life and his literary production, the human body and physical sensations were for the Argentine writer a constant concern and a matter to expose, deconstruct, utilize, and pervert. Perlongher was aware that the body occupied a crucial place for the policies applied during the dictatorship, since the body was considered “an object that can be manipulated, an object that power must shape, educate, and discipline.” For the dictatorship, “a docile body” was “a useful body” (Cohendoz 66). Perlongher’s conviction that the body is the basic material for State repression and control defines his efforts to transform it into a weapon, a “trench” (as he called it) from which to fight back.

For Perlongher, pain becomes a distinct element in his literature. In his poetry and prose, Perlongher displays several forms and representations of the body (wounded, aroused, dying, sick, etc.), which enables us to see his conception of the human body as a surface of inscription and a highly important space of signification for his writing. His conception of the body as a political element responds to a reactionary intention against a “system of oppression” or “disciplinary” that subjugates it. As Michel Foucault points out, the human body is part of a systematization of its control and management through discipline and pain:

Le corps humain entre dans une machinerie de pouvoir qui le fouille, le désarticule et le recompose. Une « anatomie politique », qui est aussi bien une « mécanique du pouvoir », est en train de naître; elle définit comment on peut avoir prise sur le corps des autres, non pas simplement pour qu'ils fassent ce qu'on désire, mais pour qu'ils opèrent comme on veut, avec les techniques, selon la rapidité et l'efficacité qu'on détermine. La discipline fabrique ainsi des corps soumis et exercés, des corps « dociles » (*Surveiller et punir* 139-140)

[The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power,’ was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed

and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. (138)]

According to Foucault, the nature of this discipline is to increase the productive force of the body while also reducing its reactionary power (140). As Marta López Gil points out, the bodies become "cuerpos politicos aprobechables" [useful political bodies] (176). For Perlongher, this was a clear condition of the bodies in relation to State power and its violent management.

In his first book, *Austria-Hungría* (1980), Perlongher's poetry considers different topics and circumstances in which pain and bodies appear as central elements. These poems refer to a variety of places and events: from images of WWII and concentration camps, to the heat of the Caribbean and Lezama Lima's writing. An exploration of the nature of pain and suffering in different forms can be traced as a common factor throughout the book. For example, in his poem "Herida pierna," the lyrical voice establishes a sort of conversation with a "morenito" and observes thoroughly the pain of a wounded leg.

la penetración del verdugo durante el acto del suplicio  
durante la hora del dolor      del calor  
de la sofocación      de los gemidos  
impotente como potente bajo esa masa de tejidos  
arbitrarios como bandidos      asaeteados por los chirridos (*Poemas completos* 47).

[      the penetration of the executioner during the act of torture  
during the hour of pain      of heat  
of the suffocation      of moans  
impotent as potent under that mass of tissue ]

One of the modes in which Perlongher makes perceivable the sensation of pain is through the collapse of language. In this poem in particular, the visual disposition of the verses, the cut rhythm of the stanzas, and the ambiguous references of the words, awakens the feeling of pain and a desperate emotion that may invite readers to understand/feel through a corporeal disposition.

In his poetry (and also in his prose), Perlongher utilizes a Neobaroque style in which he combines grandiloquent and pompous expressions alongside others that are “coarse,” “provocative,” or “obscene.” “Neobarroso,” as he calls it, becomes his distinct style that defines his writing. As Rapisardi explains, “Con el tiempo creará en su poesía un tono revulsivo y original, un eco ocre de suburbio bonaerense, en el que las figuras luminosas del neobarroco caribeño [...] se fundirán en el lodo del habla rioplatense” [With time he will create in his poetry a repulsive and original tone, an ochre echo from the the outskirts of Buenos Aires, in which bright figures of Caribbean neobaroque [...] will melt in the mud of Rioplatense speech.] (180). What Perlongher clearly contests is the oppression and violent management of the State power on bodies, desire, and identities.

When one speaks about State apparatuses and repression, whose impact on the human body triggered Perlongher’s work (and, as we will see, the rest of the artworks analyzed in this chapter), it is important to consider one of the first texts that explored these issues: Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses” (1969). Considering Marxist tradition, Althusser defines the State as “a repressive apparatus”, a “repressive machine” that ensures the dominant classes’ power over the working class (70). For Althusser, the State is inherently repressive, “a mere instrument of domination and repression” (72). In order to produce a theory of the state, Althusser explains, it is important to observe the presence of two systems that coexist: The Repressive State Apparatuses (the Army, the Police, the Prison, the judicial system, etc.) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (the Scholastic, Familial, Religious, Political, Cultural Apparatuses, etc.). The first one functions “using physical violence” (75) and the second by the realization of ideology (77). Although he highlights this clear difference, Althusser clarifies that all State apparatuses “function simultaneously on repression and on ideology” (85).

Since Perlongher's short story specifically involves a group of soldiers and the Army, it is interesting to note some of the distinctions that Althusser makes regarding the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). Unlike the Ideological, the RSA "displays superb continuity and constancy, inasmuch as it has not changed for centuries, which have nevertheless seen many different 'regimes', class regimes all" (114 -115). For Althusser, the RSA defines the central axis of the State: It cannot be changed or disturbed. The RSA defeated or destroyed would mean the disappearance of the entire State system. This would explain its strict rules, "iron discipline", and "the most severe sort of internal repression" (152) for those that work in it. In fact, for Althusser, there is only one system of RSAs whereas it is possible to find several systems for the Ideological apparatuses. The plural condition of the ISAs explains their transformation, their multiple leaders, and their condition of being the terrain for ideological confrontation. However, in the case of the RSA, the real chief of state becomes the head of all repressive apparatuses, whose orders would rule others chiefs in the rest of the RSAs. For Althusser, "The state apparatus that we are identifying as repressive presents itself as an organic whole; more precisely, as a centralized corps that is consciously and directly led from a single centre." (135) That is why later on in his text, he presents the repressive apparatus as "the hard core of the state" (152). For him, "Repression thus becomes the centre of centres" (179).

Althusser's description of the RSA and its function in the constitution and implementation of State power makes Perlongher's insolent and critical depiction of the Army in his short story "El informe Grossman" even more explicit. Although the date of production cannot be explicitly found, the text was published in 2004 in the collection *Papeles insumisos*, and later re-published in *Evita vive y otros relatos* (2009). This story compiles some testimonies of soldiers from the

Malvinas War and an analysis made by a fictional narrator called Rosa L. de Grossman.<sup>32</sup> Perlongher, as many historians and commentators have pointed out,<sup>33</sup> used this name as a pseudonym to sign and publish his texts denouncing the repression of homosexuals during the dictatorship. The story “analyzes” a document of the already extinct “Ejército de Liberación Homosexual de las Malvinas (en el exilio)” [Malvinas Army of Homosexual Liberation (in exile)].” This text begins by presenting the arduous job of the eight native “maricas” (fags) from the islands to satisfy the sexual drives of the more 40.000 Argentine and British soldiers. The short story continues with the attachment of two different testimonies given by Argentine soldiers who experienced the war and speak about the (homo)sexual conducts of the entire armed forces before and after the defeat. The soldiers’ training and the following torture that they suffer by the Gurkha forces are described as sexually pleasurable and painful. According to Palmeiro, the “engine” of Perlongher’s production could be summarized in a double movement: “[T]he erotization of politics,” and “the politization of the body” (22).

Indeed, it could be argued that in “El informe Grossman” Perlongher displays an “erotization of torture.” The description and presentation of the painful act of torture also produces pleasure for the tortured soldiers themselves; and the activity emulates an orgiastic event performed all by men. In this way, by involving both the Argentine and the British/Gurkha armed forces in the homosexual and tortuous/sexual acts, Perlongher (homo)eroticizes the Repressive State Apparatus of the Army.

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to point out that there is a sense of verisimilitude in making the narrator being called “Grossman.” Beyond the reference to Rosa Luxemburg and her husband, one can observe that Argentina has been an important destination point for the Jewish community. Their cultural and social importance could be tangentially expressed in the configuration of this character.

<sup>33</sup> “Many of Perlongher’s early writings for the feminist review *Persona* in the 1970s were signed with the name Rosa L. de Grossman, the Hispanicized married name of the Spartacus League’s founder, Rosa Luxemburg, and this anti-Leninist internationalism is also highlighted in the writing of Luxemburg, Perlongher’s mentor, for example in her critique of Lenin’s insistence on the self-determination of nations” (Bollig 33).

The short story is divided in four clearly marked parts: In the first two, the narrative voice of Rosa L. de Grossman presents the document and analyzes the circumstances around the few native homosexuals who “fought” in the Malvinas War. In the third part, Tony G. speaks in first person and presents his testimony. In part fourth, it is Damián H. who describes his experience. The entire text becomes a parody of the war and of the forces that conducted it. Perlongher reveals the hypocrisy and the absurdity of this war using, in the first two parts, very sophisticated and intellectual vocabulary, with an intricate syntax (Tavares Infantino 376). But later the tone changes in the next two parts and introduces “vulgar” and sarcastic voices to speak in the first person.

Rosa L. de Grossman, whose writing presents several metaphorical and parodic devices, narrates parts one and two particularly. Many elements described by the narrator can be read as both references to the war, and to homosexual erotic encounters. As Tavares Infantino explains, “Perlongher habla de tácticas de guerras como una metáfora de la relación sexual entre homosexuales” [Perlongher speaks about war tactics as a metaphor for sexual relation between homosexuals] (376). The text puts together the world of the war and the acts of the nocturnal, urban, sometimes-glamorous-sometimes-rough, sexually-aroused homosexuals. Indeed, Rosa L. de Grossman describes the advance of a “fugaz Ejército” [fleeting Army] whose marks of fingernails could be found next to those of bullets (76).<sup>34</sup> She later explains how the distribution of “Russian Vaseline” among the soldiers revealed a better consideration for the role of the homosexual fighters. Instead of condoms El Soldado, there was found in the armed forces’ backpacks Vaseline jars that some of them confused with cacao butter and applied to their lips. This created several confusing interactions between the soldiers, since its application on the lips

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<sup>34</sup> All the short story’s quotes are taken from its publication in the collection *Evita vive y otros cuentos*.

not only perfumed their breath, but also incited oral sex. Rosa L. de Grossman explains what happens later in the following manner:

Este fragante (y a menudo ‘inconsciente’) convite, que circuía la boca de los colimbas, puede ayudar a explicar – aun cuando no a disculpar – la decidida firmeza con que las avanzadas gorkas insertaban sin ceremonia sus estocadas, acarreado desconciertos que hasta hoy aplicados dentistas bonaerenses fallan en obturar. (77)

[This fragrant (and usually ‘unconscious’) banquet, that encircled the recruits’ mouth, can help to explain – but not apologize – the decisive determination with which the Gurkha<sup>35</sup> advance party inserted with no ceremony their thrust, leading to bewilderment that even today diligent dentists from Buenos Aires fail to seal.]

The use of certain words, such as “estocada” [thrust], displays in the text a superposition of two semantic paradigms: the one of the (homo)sexual acts and the one of violent militaristic attacks. In this way, Perlongher puts the masculine and brutal armed forces’ action on the same level as homosexual activity. He “perverts” the strict and patriarchal character of the Army by associating it with sexual acts between men, and provides homosexuals with the authority that the repressive dictatorial State totally controls.

It is a clear objective to make homosexuality be part of the Army and other patriarchal institutions. In the second part of the story, Rosa L. de Grossman explains that homosexuals have participated in war since ancient times, and she even refers to Freud:

El propio Freud, en su *Psicología de las masas* (1921), atribuía esta debilidad al contenido homosexual en su origen de las pulsiones libidinales que cohesionan las instituciones masculinas como el Ejército y la Iglesia. Cierta conexión estructural entre la homosexualidad y el ejército parece delinearse. (79)

[Freud himself, in his *Psychology of Masses* (1921), attributed this weakness to the homosexual content in the origin of libidinal drives that bring together masculine institutions like the Army or the Church. Certain structural connection between homosexuality and the army seems to be delineated]

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<sup>35</sup> “Gurkha” are soldiers originally from Nepal. There are Gurkha military units in the Nepalese, Indian, and British army. Four units joined the British army in 1948. Gurkhas were among the troops that fought in the Malvinas Islands War in 1982.

Perlongher used this bibliographic reference in other texts<sup>36</sup> with the same objective: To expose the hypocrisy of certain institutions that repress homosexuality when several of their members are homosexuals. To emphasize it even more, Rosa L. de Grossman briefly presents the testimony of a soldier called Ramón Alcalde, who has not only read Freud, but also confirms that soldiers have sex among themselves as long as they are from the same side. However, the narrator disqualifies Alcalde's version and his "patriotism," since she knows about some Gurkhas that have enjoyed perverse delights in the "rearguard" of the Argentine battalion (79).

Part III introduces Tony G.'s testimony, a soldier from class 62, La Tablada. Unlike Damián H., who speaks in Part IV, Tony G. is an "activo", a "giver" in homosexual acts. Rosa L. de Grossman clarifies this aspect clearly, because she contrasts his testimony with Damián H., who is a "pasivo", a "receiver." Tony G. speaks about the life at the headquarters during the war. He explicitly refers to the homosexual interactions between the soldiers, being himself an "activo" that, helped by others, "tortures-sodomizes" a "pasivo" comrade.

En el cuartel siempre había alguno que nos lo cogíamos, todos o casi todos, y al principio les dolía que era un encanto, pero después le tomaban el gusto y se la pasaban cargoseándose. [...] Si se portaba mal, tenía que tomarse su propio pis; para eso le hacíamos un moño en la pija y le meábamos todos en la boca. Cuando no daba más, le encajábamos la pija en una manguera. (83)

[In the headquarters there always was someone that we all fucked, or almost all, and at the beginning it hurt them, which was a delight; but later they started enjoying it and they annoyed you all the time. [...] If he misbehaved, he had to drink his own piss; for that we made a knot in his dick and we all pissed in his mouth. When he could not take it anymore, we fit his dick into a hose.]

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<sup>36</sup> In his essay "El sexo de las locas", Perlongher uses the same reference to speak more in depth about the hypocrisy of both the Church and the Army. He emphasizes the condemnation they give to the "pasivo" (passive) when they just think the "activo" (active) has a minor vice: "Esa homosexualidad es 'sublimada', pero el mismo Freud sugiere que el amor homosexual es el que mayor se adapta a esos 'lazos colectivos' masculinos. Quien haya hecho la colimba en Pigüé o el seminario en Luján, podrá prescindir de Freud. Claro que la eclosión del deseo homosexual está severamente castigada por los códigos divinos y militares. Estos últimos – por lo menos era así hacia 1970 – condenan al activo a una pena mayor que al pasivo: consideran que el pasivo es un 'enfermo', que no podía evitarlo. En cambio, el activo es un vicioso." (*Prosa plebeya* 30)



Tony G. describes other forms in which they train/torture/satisfy their comrade: Binding him by the hands and feet; forcing him to perform oral sex on everyone; being beat up (84). These sorts of scenes are also found later when the Gurkhas and the British arrive. The Argentine army heard that the bombs were getting closer, and they finally were defeated and taken as prisoners. As Tony G. recounts, as soon as they Gurkhas arrived, they wanted to be satisfied by the Argentine “losers”. Some of them resisted, which brought painful consequences:

El gurka [...] lo cazó al Pancho, un correntino, lo dio vuelta y le tajeó las bombachas con un cuchillo. Al primero que le puso la pija en la boca el Pancho le amagó un mordiscón, ¡para qué!, le rompieron los dientes a patadas. Pero, ensangrentado y todo, siguió haciéndose el canchero y remilgaba en abrir las cachas. Así que el del cuchillo puntiagudo le ensanchó el ojo del culo. Cuando acabaron le desataron una mano para que se pajeara. El pobre estaba medio muerto y no conseguía, le cortaron la pija de un tajo y se la insertaron en el culo, si ni para una puñeta le servía. (84-85)

[The Gurkha [...] hunted Pancho, from Corrientes, turned him over and slashed his pants with a knife. To the first one who put his dick in his mouth, Pancho tried to bite him, for what!, they kicked his teeth out. But, bloodstained and everything, he kept showing off and was fussy to open his butt. So the one with the sharp knife widened the eye of his ass. When they finished, they untied one hand so he could jerk off. The poor one was half dead and he could not, so they cut his dick and inserted it into his ass; he wasn't even able to use it for jerking off.]

In Part IV this sort of scene is also brutally described by Damián H., who does not only witness them like Tony G., but also experiences them in the flesh. When the Gurkhas arrive, Damián H. suffers different kinds of torture, including putting clasps on his nipples, being hanged with chains, or being fornicated with “condoms made with steel spikes” (89), which in the end he seems to enjoy. As we can see, Perlongher displays throughout the story a conception of the body as a space for the inscription of exaggerated pain as much pleasure. All militaristic and violent attacks and sadistic acts of torture are amalgamated with homosexual, orgiastic, and “festive” sexual encounters.

Perlongher's style encompasses all levels of language: His mark can be found morphologically (the modification of words and creation of neologisms<sup>37</sup>), semantically (the double sense of certain words), and syntactically (the particular and intricate 'neo-baroque' style that shaped his sentences). Perlongher's "perversion" of language is what Palmeiro calls a "lengua emputecida,"<sup>38</sup> an "enraged/horny" language. Language becomes his material, the means that concentrates both conceptions of the body as violated by an authoritarian system and as an active agent of desire. Palmeiro defines the "emputecimiento" of language as "'una venganza festiva' respecto del dolor y la violencia, a la que se contesta con una violencia destructiva más furiosa, y con placer (el cuerpo como superficie de dolor pero también de placer), ya que hay una sensualidad que se explora en los pliegues de la violencia" ['a festive revenge' regarding pain and violence, to which one replies with a more furious destructive violence, and with pleasure (the body as surface of pain but also pleasure), since there is a sensuality that is explored in the creases of violence] (22). Perlongher's distorted use of language refers to his constant objective to make it a "trench" from which fight back.

The (homo)erotization of torture and the Army in Perlongher's "El informe Grossman", I argue, pursues a double aim: 1) a homosexualization of war to attack the authoritarian and patriarchal character of the dictatorial State; and 2) the configuration of a morbid homosexual body and desire in order to disrupt the imposition of a "dominant gay identity" as the supreme subjectivity.

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<sup>37</sup> One example could be: Perlongher writes "interanalización" (76) instead of "internalización". The irruption of the morpheme "a" in the middle of word makes it a neologism whose sarcasm completely fits into the sentence: "El peligro de una guerra 'prolongada/permanente' corría parejo a las señales de interanalización de la refriega." (76)

<sup>38</sup> The Argentine slang "emputecer" could be translated as "to be upset", "to get furious"; but in its constitution one could see the word "puto" or "puta", which is derogatory and refers to either a homosexual or a female sexual worker.

It is important to note that most of Perlongher's literary production is marked by the first objective. His motivation was to denounce the constant presence of repression on homosexuals before, during, and after the dictatorship. In fact, he explains in his essay "El sexo de las locas", that speaking about homosexuality in Argentina is speaking about "horror." All of the abductions, torture, and robberies that those considered "homosexuals" suffer may actually explain the genocide exercised by the dictatorship (*Prosa plebeya* 30). Perlongher himself was beat up and incarcerated in one of his visits to Mendoza, a place where, he later said, "everyone was a police officer." (*Papeles insumisos* 139).

In order not only to reveal the oppression endured by homosexuals at the hands of repressive institutions, but also to attack it, Perlongher makes these institutions part of the sexual acts. His texts "disturb" the patriarchal and authoritarian discourse by juxtaposing the Army and other apparatuses with homosexuality. Both in his prose and poetry, Perlongher refers to the "desired violence", or the "delight of pain". Particularly, "torture" reunites some qualities that amalgamate State violence with homosexual encounters: The fact of being marginal, outside of public discourse, out of public approval and acknowledgement. Nobody wants to know or talk publicly about torture or homosexuality. Perlongher observes in this proximity the opportunity to make both visible, to tie them together. As Wasem explains:

La escritura de Perlongher emigra hasta los márgenes para dar cierta visibilidad molesta a las prácticas estatales, y para poner de manifiesto el componente homoerótico que estas prácticas disimulan, y que las atraviesa. Se dirige hacia el límite donde el lenguaje deja de poder nombrar esas mismas prácticas para exhibir el mecanismo de la violencia, con una expresión que, sin referirla, pone de manifiesto sus huellas. Sin hablar, muestra las heridas; el corte que resulta del asomo al abismo de la violencia que ejerce, sobre los márgenes y en la invisibilidad, el terrorismo de estado. (159)

[Perlongher's writing migrates to the margins to give certain annoying visibility to State practices, and to expose the homoerotic component that these practices conceal, and that cross them. It goes to the limit where language cannot name anymore those same practices in order to display the mechanism of violence, with an expression that, without telling it,

expose its marks. Without speaking, his writing shows wounds; it shows the cut that comes of the hint to the abyss of violence exercised, on the margins and invisibly, by State terrorism.]

The idea, as Wasem continues, is to reveal a “repressed sexuality of the repressive subject” (167). The same mechanism that we find in the short story can also be traced in Perlongher’s most famous poem “Cadáveres” [Corpses]. This poem could be characterized as a listing of places, situations, characters, and actions in which suddenly corpses appear. In fact, all stanzas end with the phrase: “Hay cadáveres” [There are corpses]. The poem, written during the bus ride from Buenos Aires to Sao Paulo when Perlongher decided to seek refuge in 1981, becomes one of the central texts in his entire production. The poem constantly builds and breaks semantic and syntactic constructions, expelling lost meanings that gradually reveal a systematic encounter with death. Perlongher shows that corpses appear in every dimension of life materializing the invisible but powerful figure of *desaparecidos*.

He does not only make these corpses the result of State terrorism, but also of State oppression of homosexuals. The poem becomes a textile surface of pain and desire, inflicted suffering and suppressed sexual arousal. These elements could be traced in one single stanza, for example:

La que hace años que no ve una pija  
La que se la imagina, como aterciopelada, en una cuna (o cuña)  
Beba, que se escapó con su marido, ya impotente, a una quinta  
donde los  
vigilaban, con un naso, o con un martillito, en las rodillas, le  
tomaron los pezones, con una tenacilla (Beba era tan bonita como una  
profesora...)  
Hay Cadáveres” (*Poemas completos* 86)

[The one that it's been ages that does not see a dick  
The one that imagines it, like velvety, in a cradle (or wedge)  
Beba, who escaped with her husband, already impotent, to a country house  
where  
they guarded them, with a conk, or with a little hammer, in the knees, they

took the nipples, with little tongs (Beba was so pretty like a professor...)  
There are Corpses]

Expressions such as “los vigilaban”, “con un martillito, en las rodillas”, or “le tomaron los pezones, con una tenacilla” clearly refer to pain and torture lived by those abducted during the dictatorship. But at the same time, Perlongher emphasizes the sensation of sexual pleasure and desire as a clear presence in the same context with images like the “velvety” male organ. Just as in the short story, Perlongher “breaks language” and exposes parallel semantic lines that construct an erotization of torture. In fact, Wasem identifies in the poem five different themes, “torture”, “repressive State apparatus”, and “eroticism” being three of them (150). He affirms that in the abyss of semantic rupture, it is possible to perceive how “the military, the erotic, and torture” are incorporated in the poem as a single weave (157). The physical sensations of pain and pleasure are not only the result of the semantic juxtaposition of certain words; they emerge from a text whose entire semantic and syntactic construction has been broken. But from this rupture arises a more primitive mode of language, closer to the sentient skin of the body. As Rosa points out, Perlongher’s writing refers to a language prior to language itself; a language of moans, groans, and weeping, of suffering and/or sexual enjoyment (Cangi 31).

The “erotization” of torture, as I stated before, not only aims to attack the authoritarian and patriarchal discourse of the dictatorial State and its apparatuses, but it also pursues a second objective: The construction of a morbid, dirty, turbid homosexual desire, in order to disrupt the imposition and adoption of a dominant gay subjectivity. In most of his texts, Perlongher prevents and rejects the consolidation of the figure of the “gay”, its theoretical background and its concept of identity coming mostly from the United States and its academy and activism. At the beginning of his Master thesis that was later published as *La prostitución masculina* (1993), in which he

explores and analyzes male prostitution in Sao Paulo, Perlongher warns about the irruption of a new model that defines the interaction between young men and their costumers: “the gay/gay model”. Perlongher observes the end of the “classical intermasculine relation”, which is more “popular” or “hierarchical”: The “marica/chongo” model [fag/hyper masculine man]. (14) Later, AIDS and its mortal consequences contributed to the disappearance of homosexuality as Perlongher understood it. In fact, in one of his most famous essays, “La desaparición de la homosexualidad”, Perlongher nostalgically refers to this inevitable process. He affirms that homosexuality is returning to its catacombs from where it once emerged; it fades from society and has become banal (*Prosas plebeyas* 88). This nostalgia also crosses his book *El fantasma del Sida* (1988), in which he explores the medical discourse about the disease and its implications for the social body.

As Rapisardi and Modarelli affirm, before the return of democracy in 1983, homosexual interactions took place in public spaces, such as public bathrooms (“teteras” or “T-rooms”), clandestine and private parties, and cruising in the streets (the well-known Lavalle street in Buenos Aires was one of the most utilized). Perlongher defended the promiscuous, licentious, hidden homosexual interactions in which the figure of the “marica” and the “chongo” were well established. For Perlongher, this “classic” model was freer, open to an interaction between all social classes beyond their economic background (in the public bathrooms the encounter of the immigrant worker and the rich business man was not atypical). With the arrival of the American gay model, homosexuality became more visible and these hidden interactions started to disappear and desire became privatized (the establishment of several gay saunas and bathhouses to which men could enter paying a fee define the end of homosexuality as Perlongher conceived it). As Gunderman explains, Perlongher’s conception of an “anti-neoliberal homosexuality” shaped the

mode in which he portrays sexual desire. Gunderman also affirms that the politics of desire exposed and defended by the American academy by the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s responded to a certain economic paradigm that dominated the discourse: Neoliberalism. Instead of being marginal and defiant, these “queer politics” are defined within the hegemonic dynamics of neoliberal culture of the 1990s, and they even falsely conceive themselves as “globalizing” since they present themselves as the “universal libertarian model” (133).

Gunderman explains that the success and imposition of the American gay model in the world responds less to a permissive morality in societies and more to changes in the conception of productivity and the importance given to consumption in neoliberal societies: “El sujeto postliberal [...] es uno cuyo único mandamiento es el goce, base de la sociedad de consumo” (142) [The postliberal subject is one whose only commandment is enjoyment, which is the basis for a society of consumption]. In this context Queer politics and American gay identity arise, and consolidate. Gunderman continues: “Es en esta coyuntura que el modelo de liberación gay, basándose en el deseo para establecer su identidad como grupo, ha podido contribuir, e integrarse, al proyecto mayoritario.” [In these circumstances the model of gay liberation, based on desire to establish its identity as group, has been able to contribute, and integrate itself, to the majoritarian project.] (29). For Gunderman, the neoliberal gay desire, due to its velocity and voraciousness – i.e. the endless need to satisfy its desire with pleasure –, has detached itself from the process of subjectification itself. The image of the gay has become more important than what it really represents. It is a process of de-naturalization or un-materialization. Referring to Jameson’s *The Cultural Turn*, Gunderman presents an analogy to make this idea more clear: “Como el dinero desanclado, “flotante”, del capitalismo financiero según Jameson (un dinero que ya no es capital de trigo, de carne o de petróleo, porque borra esta huella de la materialidad), la imagen en la sociedad

neoliberal se ha independizado y des-materializado.” [As the unattached money, ‘floating,’ from financial capitalism according to Jameson (a money that is not wheat, beef, or oil capital, because it erases this track of materiality), the image in neoliberal society has become independent and de-materialized.] This conception of desire, and later the AIDS crisis, became the threat for Perlongher’s understanding and celebration of homosexuality.

In order to disrupt the assumption of a dominant gay identity and desire in his writing, Perlongher develops a homosexual desire nearer to the materiality of the body, one more engaged in corporeal perceptions and its fluids, its smells, its secretions, and death. In this way, Perlongher demonstrated his opposition to the adoption and imposition of the gay identity in his poetry, essays, and narrative texts. As Gunderman explains, Perlongher constructed:

un modelo de subjetividad homosexual que interrumpe los flujos deseosos (los cuales se acomodan con la ideología hegemónica neoliberal). Esto lo llevó a cabo, primero, a partir de una insistencia temática y formal en las muertes y los cadáveres [...]; y segundo, a partir de la insistencia en prácticas homosexuales que no se conforman con la proyección de una homosexualidad integrada al mercado neoliberal. (133)

[a model of homosexual subjectivity that interrupts the desiring flows (which adjust to the neoliberal hegemonic ideology). He carried this out, first, by a thematic and formal insistence on deaths and corpses [...]; and secondly, by insisting on homosexual practices that do not fit into the projection of a homosexuality integrated to the neoliberal market.]

The erotization of torture that we can find in “El informe Grossman” also fits into the body’s “crude materiality” used by Perlongher to contest the imposition of a dominant gay identity. As we have seen, the homosexual practices described in the short story that involve pain, denigration, and the exposure of crudeness of the body respond to the construction and defense of a different model of subjectivity.

He was aware that the system does not only operate on the body by force and violence, but also by discourse, by shaping certain modes used to conceive oneself. Perlongher himself writes: “el tan mentado ‘sistema’ no se sustenta solamente por la fuerza de las armas ni por determinantes



económicos; exige la producción de cierto modelo de sujeto ‘normal’ que lo soporte” (“Los devenires minoritarios” 215) [the so called ‘system’ is not sustained only by the force of arms nor by economic determinants; it requires the production of a certain model of ‘normal’ subject that carries it out.]

The proximity of pain and pleasure, torture and homosexual orgies that Perlongher constructs in the short story pursues a double objective: At the same time that it reveals and attacks the mechanism of oppression applied by State apparatuses on the body and its patriarchal discourse, it also repels the establishment of a neoliberal conception of homosexual desire and subjectivity. For Perlongher, politics and corporeality are inseparable because the body is not only the center of ideological and oppressive operations by the State, but also a “trench,” an individual/communal space from which one counterattacks.

### **The Point of View and the Body of Torture: Paula Markovitch’s film *El premio***

“...to bring pain into the world by objectifying it in language,  
is to destroy one of them...”  
Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

With the return of democracy in 1983, cinema has become for Argentine society a clear means to think about History, more specifically, the last dictatorship. In addition to Perlongher’s writing, Paula Markovitch’s film *El premio* (2011) reveals the violent mechanism and oppression applied to the social body by the dictatorial government. But in Markovitch’s case, the perspective from which her film portrays violence belongs to a trend that has been growing in recent years: The view of the dictatorship from children’s eyes. *El premio* tells the story of Cecilia, a seven-year old girl who, accompanied by her mother, lives hiding from the military government. They take shelter in an abandoned shack next to the beach in San Clemente, province of Buenos Aires. After a while, Cecilia starts attending a school and meets new friends and a teacher. One day a group of soldiers come to the school and announce a composition contest in which students must write about

their homeland and how much they love it. Cecilia, following her instincts and fears, writes that the Army has killed her cousin and her father. Once her mother finds out about the text she submitted, she desperately tries to take it back from the teacher. The teacher gives Cecilia the opportunity to re-write her composition and submit it to the contest. Surprisingly, Cecilia wins and wants to attend the ceremony, but her mother opposes. Cecilia escapes anyways and receives the prize, but later suffers her own mother's rejection.

The movie always depicts the social experience of living during the dictatorship from Cecilia's point of view. Markovitch herself spent her childhood in Argentina during the military government, which adds an important autobiographical dimension to the story.<sup>39</sup> This film is inscribed within a group of films whose main objective is to reflect on the dictatorship from the perspective of children. Films such as *Kamchatka* (Marcelo Piñeyro, 2002), *Andrés no quiere dormir la siesta* (Daniel Bustamante, 2009), and *Infancia clandestina* (Benjamín Ávila, 2011) are examples of this trend in Argentine filmmaking. Other films like the Chilean *Machuca* (Andrés Wood, 2004), the Brazilian *O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias* (Cao Hamburger, 2006), or *Voces inocentes* (Luis Mandoki, 2005, Mexico/El Salvador) are some examples of South American films with similar intentions.

The analysis of Markovitch's *El premio* is subjected to two different, but related approaches. First, I focus on the development of the story and characters of the film. Since Cecilia's point of view is prioritized, all narrative elements unfold from her perspective. Consequently, the film does not show a summarized or totalized version of what is happening; it does not impose on the children an adult need or capacity for comprehension. The film does not

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<sup>39</sup> In an interview given to CorreCamare Cine, Markovitch refers to her own experience and its implications for this film. Switching houses and hiding her real identity, things that Cecilia in the film has to live, really happened to Markovitch ("Entrevista de Paula Markovitch para CorreCamara").

display information in order to provide a clear picture of the circumstances in which Cecilia lives; those circumstances are inferred by observing her own world and interactions with others. The film represents reality and social relations from the children's experiences, capturing their daily lives and emotions. But violence and oppression permeate and appear.

The film translates the forceful mechanism of State power that is applied in the entire social body into the children's perspective. In the case of Cecilia, State oppression appears within one of its most important apparatuses: the School. The development of the story, the position of the camera, and the framing of certain shots support the construction of Cecilia's point of view that orients the film.

Secondly, I focus on the film's representation and conception of pain and torture, which appear at different moments and in different ways. In *El premio*, corporeality becomes present in the following manners: By visual images (the scabs of a wound); by tactile references (the cold that punished children endured at school); and sonorous elements (Cecilia's weeping). In the film Markovitch makes Cecilia a character that functions as a sort of "sentient net" that, although does not intellectually comprehend the consequences of State terrorism, perceives on the skin the results of its violent mechanisms. In this way, the point of view selected to tell this story constitutes not only the development of the narrative world, but also a physical experience that encompasses what was felt by the entire social framework.

Markovitch's film could be inscribed in the cultural production of "postmemory." Unlike more traditional studies on memory, as Szurmuk explains, this conception favors subjectivity and tries to report about the moment in which lived experiences become history (224). Postmemory "se ocupa solamente de hechos traumáticos cuya perdurabilidad emocional marca las generaciones subsiguientes a los que experimentaron" (226) [takes on traumatic events whose emotional

perdurability has marked subsequent generations.] This cinema refers to the experiences endured by sons, daughters, or grandchildren of *desaparecidos*, tortured or exiled Argentines during the dictatorship. Within this group of films, it is possible to distinguish a recent trend of filmmaking whose interest rests on the experience of children. This sort of production in particular, unlike other films made in the past, in which violence and torture are explicitly shown (such as *Garage Olimpo*, dir. Marco Becchis, 1999), moves violent scenes and the obvious process of torture out of the frame. These sort of images, as Magno explains, were not really necessary to have a notion of what that period of history was for the victims of State terrorism (129).<sup>40</sup>

In Markovitch's film, in order to demonstrate the mode in which the story unfolds from Cecilia's point of view, one can observe the information presented about the characters and their circumstances. It is never explained what really happened to Cecilia's father, nor the specific reason why they are running away from the government (although we can presume that Cecilia's parents have been involved in political activism); it is never said where they are actually coming from (maybe the city of Buenos Aires) or what their future plans are. What the audience knows is more or less what Cecilia knows and what she experiences in her current situation (how she plays by the shore, her conversations with new friends, the name of a dog, etc.) From the beginning, Cecilia asks her mother about the meaning of a word, "pesimista" (pessimistic), that she read in a paper. Later, by the end of the film, she asks again and her mother explains: "it means he is not there." It is possible to infer that this is a code-word in a letter sent to the mother to indicate not

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<sup>40</sup> Regarding this cinematic trend, Feierstein expands in another article: "De manera interesante, la mayoría de las películas de "hijos" son una *ópera prima*, en muchos casos incluso el trabajo final para terminar sus estudios de cine y/o el primer largometraje. [...] estos jóvenes cineastas parecen haber tenido la necesidad de tematizar estas marcas antes de comenzar su carrera; una urgencia de sacar de sí esta historia, de no llevar solos la carga, sino dimensionarla en su sentido social[...] estos jóvenes parecen cambiar la fórmula por *la escritura para la vida*: es necesario contar para empezar a vivir." (138)

only the death of Cecilia's father, but also the urgency to escape and remain hidden. Cecilia responds: "I don't understand".

This phrase summarizes the entire emotional and intellectual journey endured by the main character, who not only has to live in an abandoned shack, but also must lie at school, re-write a text for the contest, be yelled at, and be prohibited from attending a ceremony and receiving a prize. The limitation of the information then supports the film's attempt to build the narrative world from Cecilia's perspective.

This aspect of the screenplay can also be found in the visual configuration and camera positions. Since the story unfolds from Cecilia's point of view, she becomes the center from which everything is observed. The camera follows her all the time, and all scenes have her as the center of attention. Coherently then, the camera observes from her position and adopts her level.

For example, the day that the soldiers arrive at the school, the camera registers Cecilia's reactions in long shots. When the soldier and the teacher speak, the camera observes as if it were sitting in one of school desk with the rest of the children. In this way, Markovitch highlights her priority in recounting these events from the students and Cecilia's perspective, which also allows spectators to experience the story from their position. The strategy displayed in the screenplay finds a visual parallel. The shots captured in the classroom from the children's perspective also encapsulate an important factor that the film traces: The proximity of the State apparatuses (the Army – represented by the soldier – and the School – represented by the teacher) and their shared and violent mechanism of control of the body.

By focusing on Cecilia's point of view, the film demarcates the dimensions of the experience of State terrorism. This is why the School becomes the film's most present entity that shows the mode by which the State applies its control on the social body. As Althusser explains,

the School is one of the Ideological State Apparatuses that supports the construction and definition of an ideology and sustains the naturalization of a certain social system. Markovitch's film aims to represent State repression and violent administration in the way in which the School treats children. The School becomes a parallel of the entire State, a micro-world that represents the more general reality (see Figures 25, 26, and 27).



Figures 25, 26, and 27: The soldier visiting the school, seen from the children's perspective.

When the officers arrive at the classroom, the teacher asks the students to show what they have learned: To salute like soldiers. She asks them to stand up, stay firm, and not smile. However, she does not succeed. The children laugh, do not obey, or play with each other. This is one simple example of how the teacher (the figure of State power) applies to the group of students (the social group) a strict and specific discipline on their bodies (stay firm, salute, no laughing, no sitting.) This particular mode of administering the body appears throughout the film. I focus specifically in the ways in which pain and torture are represented in the movie.

It is well known that the military dictatorship used torture as their main practice to obtain information and, more generally, as a mechanism to discipline the entire nation. They used a

systematic mechanism to abduct, torture, and eliminate people. They established Centros Clandestinos de Detención (CCD, Clandestine Detention Centers) throughout the entire country, which functioned in military buildings, police departments, old garages, sport centers, abandoned houses or construction sites. According to CONADEP's report (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas), *Nunca más*, entering these places "significó en todos los casos DEJAR DE SER, para lo cual se intentó desestructurar la identidad de los cautivos, se alteraron sus referentes tempoespaciales, y se atormentaron sus cuerpos y espíritus" (45) [meant in all cases TO STOP BEING ONESELF, for which they tried to break the captives' identity, modified their time-space references, and tormented their bodies and spirits]. It is possible to observe the presence of different modes in which physical and emotional inflicted pain appears in the film. I argue that corporeal suffering takes places in the film in three different ways: In visual images, tactile references, and sounds.

After Cecilia joins the school and becomes Silvia's friend, she meets Walter Carmasotti. He invites them to go to an abandoned construction site, asks them to try some alcohol, and takes them to play by the sand dunes. This scene reveals different visual references to torture applied by the government. First, the empty and dark space where the children meet and drink alcohol resembles some CCDs described by survivors in the CONADEP report. Old walls with the paint peeling off, a half-constructed empty site only occupied by the children; all seems to refer to the different buildings utilized by the Grupos de Trabajo (Work Squads) during the dictatorship. Secondly, once in the room, Walter shows the girls a healing wound. They scream, laugh, and ask him "to cover it." He explains that he wounded himself with a piece of metal and that the injury "beats" like a heart. The girls feel curious and get closer to listen to the beating. But Walter tells them that this "feels inside." Although pain and torture are not directly portrayed, this scene echoes

them. It is possible to refer to the report *Nunca más*, in which hundreds of survivors provided their testimonies to reconstruct this dark chapter of Argentine history:

En cuanto a su construcción, fueron en algunos casos dependencias que ya funcionaban anteriormente como sitios de detención. En otros, se trató de locales civiles, dependencias policiales e, inclusive, asentamientos de las mismas Fuerzas Armadas, acondicionados ex-profeso para funcionar como C.C.D. [...] Los que con mayor frecuencia fueron utilizados como campos de concentración fueron los destacamentos y comisarías. (48)

[Regarding their construction, they were in some cases spaces that already functioned before as detention sites. In other cases, they were civil locations, police spaces and, also, the Army settlements itself, prepared to function as CCD. [...] What were used more frequently as concentration camps were police stations.]

The description of some of these CCD may also provide a clear picture that relates to the space in which the children play in *El premio*:

“Club Atlético”: Sin ventilación ni luz natural. Temperatura entre 40 y 45 grados, en verano. Mucho frío en invierno. Gran humedad. Las paredes y piso rezumaban agua continuamente. (68)

“La Cacha”: Edificio principal antiguo y mal conservado, constaba de tres plantas. Subsuelo con capacidad para 12 detenidos. Planta baja: salón amplio para el personal, salas de tortura, celda colectiva para unos 10 detenidos. Primer piso: gran sala dividida en boxes, por medio de separaciones de alambre tipo artístico, con capacidad para unos 20 detenidos. Piso de mosaico y ventiletes. Había además dos piecitas sin puerta. El baño se encontraba en un entrepiso, descendiendo unos pocos escalones. (69)

[Club Atlético: No ventilation nor natural light. Temperature between 40 and 45 Celsius, in the summer. Very cold in winter. Great humidity. Walls and floor exuded water continuously.]

La Cacha: Main building, old and badly preserved; it had three floors. Basement with capacity for 12 detainees. Ground floor: wide room for the personnel, torture rooms, collective jail for 10 detainees. First floor: big room divided in boxes by separations made of an “artistic wire,” with capacity for 20 detainees. Mosaic floor and air vents. There were two little rooms with no doors. The bathroom was located in a mezzanine, going down few steps.]

Bearing these descriptions in mind, it is possible to affirm that the construction site in which the children play (the reference to the cold temperature, no doors, humidity, darkness, emptiness, etc.) may establish a reference to the real CCD in which many people were taken and tortured.



Also, the visual image of the open wound and the scabs also contribute to create a connection between the detention spaces in the film with the real locations. Unlike other films that directly show it, in *El premio*, torture appears as a silent and invisible presence, sometimes visually evoked (see Figure 28).



Figure 28: The wound feels inside.

Pain not only appears in the film in visual metaphors. Another key scene of Markovitch's movie happens when the teacher finds out that Walter has cheated on an exam and that someone helped him. She asks Walter to confess and tell her who helped him. He denies it and refuses to say anything. The rest of the children laugh and the teacher cannot control them. She yells and asks them to stay silent, but nobody obeys. Suddenly, the film cuts to another scene: The children are walking in circles in the school's patio, in silence, dejected. It is cold and raining. The camera focuses on the teacher who walks near the center, observing everyone and repeating the same question: "Who helped Carmasotti?" She says that she knows it is cold, but she assures them that no one will leave until somebody confesses. Finally, Silvia accuses her friend Cecilia. If we observe the methodology applied by the teacher in order to obtain information, it is possible to compare it to and find similarities with the mechanism applied by the State Repressive Apparatus during the dictatorship. The teacher, the figure of authority within the classroom, loses control and, in order to regain it and extract information, forces the children, the social group, to endure physical pain by walking in the cold and rain.

This sort of torture applied by the teacher condenses in this micro-world the same practice exercised by State terrorism. But unlike the previous analyzed scene, here pain appears as a tactile reference, as the cold and the rain felt by the children (see Figure 29). Other scenes in the film utilize the same synesthetic construction to refer to pain (the sound of the wind, the need to use blankets at night in the shack, and the water that floods the place, for example.)



Figure 29: The teacher's "torture."

Finally, torture and pain also appears in the film as sonorous images. By the end, after Cecilia has disobeyed her mother and attended the ceremony to receive the prize, she notices that her mother acts differently. She is angry and does not show affection for Cecilia. She paces from one side to the other being followed by the little girl without paying attention to her. Cecilia asks forgiveness, but the mother does not respond. She avoids her. Defeated, the little girl sits by the beach facing the sea and cries. Her face is covered with a hood and her hair. Her sobbing continues and intensifies with the sound of the waves and the wind while the image fades. This is the last scene of the film. Suddenly, all the pain accumulated during the film implodes within herself and breaks her. Her weeping, which is sustained as the last sonorous image even after the screen gets dark, summarizes Cecilia's painful journey during the film. At this point, Cecilia has lost her identity, she has become a girl without a face (the last visual image).

According to Elaine Scarry, torture is a process that consists in destroying the prisoner's world, reducing his/her identity, and breaking everything that defines him/her as person (37).

Scarry also affirms that torture destroys the “voice of the prisoner”, and this later becomes just a weeping, a scream. These, she explains, are “the sounds anterior to language that a human being reverts to when overwhelmed by pain” (49). At the end of *El premio*, the physical and emotional pain that has subjected Cecilia finally breaks her and reduces her to tears; crying becomes her only way to express it. At this point of the film, there are no words, no facial expressions, only the sound of her weeping (see Figure 30). The film refers again to the practice of torture and the feeling of pain by using sonorous elements that last even after the visual image fades.



Figure 30: Cecilia cries at the end of the film.

It is possible to observe in *El premio* a concentrated micro-world in which broader social issues permeate and are perceived. Markovitch constructs the story from a little girl's point of view, not only by the mode in which the narrative world unfolds, but also in the visual constitution of the images. The position of the camera and the framing of shots reveal the prioritization of children's perspective. The film also develops through children, particularly in Cecilia's experience, a sort of sensitive net that, although it does not completely comprehend the “problems of the adult world” and the violence of State terrorism, feels them intimately. The children actually “understand” through their skin the violent process that the adults and they are living in. This can be traced in the mode in which torture and pain appear as visual, sonorous and tactile elements throughout the film. The world of the adults remains alien, but its concerns, fears, and sensations infiltrate the physical and emotional world of children.

**Sexuality, Abuse, Laundries and Ireland's "Architecture of Indictment": Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters***

The School and the Army are not the only apparatuses whose violent mechanisms of control are represented in cinema and literature, as we have seen in previous sections. In the case of Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* and as we will also see in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena*, the Church and religious discourse are shown as a forceful apparatus that shapes people's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. It is important to note that the Ireland that Mullan depicts (1960s) differs highly from the one in which he films (2000s). The influence of Catholicism and the Church has changed due to a series of scandals that began during the 1990s and that resulted in a strong criticism from the media and cultural production. His film strongly contributes to this critical voice that intends to diminish the Church's control of and influence on society. In this section I analyze Mullan's production in order particularly to observe the modes in which pain and torture are represented and in which they denounce the Church and religious discourse as a highly violent apparatus in Irish society.

Giorgio Agamben's observations in *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* (What is an Apparatus?) (2006) are useful for the analysis of all artworks in this chapter, but particularly for both Mullan and Gutiérrez Alea's films. In his text, Agamben offers a genealogic study of the term "apparatus" in order to reveal not only the history of the concept, but also its basic nature. Agamben refines some previous studies made by Michael Foucault, and demarcates in the origins of the term "apparatus" a capital contribution made by the religious discourse. For Foucault, the term "apparatus" or *dispositif* refers to "a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge" (2). Based on this, Agamben affirms that the apparatus is not only defined by the presence of an institution, but also that it can basically include anything, linguistic and non-linguistic: Discourses, police measures, philosophical propositions, buildings,

government's offices, etc. Agamben sees the apparatus as a network established between these elements, with a concrete strategic function, located in a power relation and in the intersection of power relations as well as in relations of knowledge (3). Apparatus could be anything that impacts people's ways of acting, thinking, reacting, feeling, etc.

Agamben also notes that religion plays an important role in the conception of the term "apparatus". He returns to a Greek term used by the Fathers of the Church to which all other terms (*dispositif*, "apparatus", *dispositio*, "positivity")<sup>41</sup> refer: *oikonomia*. This term has a decisive theological function. Its meaning, the administration of the home (*oikos*), was used by the Fathers of the Church to explain the threefold nature of the divine figure (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). They defined the Trinity by saying that God entrusts in Christ the "economy", the administration and government of human history (10). But God is still one. Then, Christ is the *oikonomia* that rules the world; and God, continuing being one, the "being", is also triple. Later, Agamben observes that the Latin Fathers translated this term as *dispositio*, which is the origin of the French term *dispositif* or "apparatus". This is why all terms that end up in "apparatus" (the Latin *dispositio*, the French *dispositif*), derive from the semantic sphere of *oikonomia*. Agamben affirms:

Comune a tutti questi termini è il rimando a una *oikonomia*, cioè a un insieme di prassi, di saperi, di misure, di istituzioni il cui scopo è di gestire, governare, controllare e orientare in un senso che si pretende utile i comportamenti, i gesti e i pensieri degli uomini. (20)

[What is common to all these terms is that they refer back to this *oikonomia*, that is, to a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage,

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<sup>41</sup> Agamben traces the origin of Foucault's concept of "dispositif". Jean Hyppolite, one of Foucault's mentors, presents the concepts "positivity" and "positive religion" as capital for Hegel's thought: "positive or historical religion encompasses the set of beliefs, rules, and rites that in a certain society and at a certain historical moment are externally imposed on individuals" (4). "Positivity", a term that later becomes "apparatus" in Foucault's thinking, indicates an obstacle to freedom, an imposition on subjects to shape their behavior and to obtain an effect. These "positive elements" could be found in religion, and also, as Hyppolite explains, in "the social state." Hyppolite's contributions were a determinant for Foucault's concern of history and its impact on individuals, and his conceptualization of "dispositif" or "apparatus".

govern, control, and orient – in a way that purports to be useful – the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings. (12)]

Agamben's study of the "apparatus" clearly reveals not only its theological origin, but also the nature of control, imposition, and administration on humans of the religious discourse. The "economy of religion" – something that we will also explore in the next section – determines the way certain institutions manage and administer bodies. The Irish laundries and asylums run by religious orders are a specific example of how the apparatus as a network exercises its management on the social body. Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* shows the leading role of the Church that, along with other societal apparatuses, imposes a strict and violent moral control on young girls.

Mullan's film, released in 2002, shows the story of three teenage girls (Margaret, Rose, and Bernadette) who were sent to one of the Magdalene asylums (also known as Magdalene 'laundries') at the end of the 1960s near Dublin. Although they are imprisoned for different circumstances, sexuality becomes the main reason for their confinement. Margaret's family excludes her after one of her cousins sexually assaulted her during a wedding celebration. They see her as a threat and the one that incited the attack. Rose, a single mother, is forced by her family with a priest's support to give up her son for adoption. Finally, Bernadette is an orphan whose beauty attracts boys' attention; for that, she becomes a threat and too inclined to initiate sexual relationships. Inside the laundry, the girls meet Crispina, an intellectually disabled mother, imprisoned for being an easy target for men's sexual misconduct. Based on true facts, the film develops a fictional story showing the everyday life within this institution. After years of enduring torture and a hard-working routine, all characters end up abandoning this place in different ways: Margaret's brother suddenly shows up and takes her home; Crispina is sent to a mental hospital;

Rose and Bernadette attack the nuns and escape. As Mullan himself affirms, the film develops a “traditional story in the prison genre” (Crowdus 29) with a marked narrative structure.

Based on testimonies of survivors and photographic material, Mullan sets the story with factual historical elements. Developed in the nineteenth century as a system to counteract the increase of prostitution, the system of Magdalene asylums appeared as philanthropic and voluntary rehabilitative institutions. They started as part of the rehabilitative mission of the Victorian rescue movement, whose “success was defined in terms of returning the repentant sinner, as a reformed and useful member, to society” (Smith 26). However, in their 133 years of history, the system also adopted an extreme carceral character, which became stronger when Ireland gained its independence in 1922 and its need to define a “national identity” intensified the authority of the Church. The systematization of the persecution, condemnation, and management of women and children by Catholic religious authorities defines Ireland’s “architecture of containment” or “architecture of indictment”. Unmarried mothers, illegitimate children, orphans, mentally disabled women, and victims of rape or incest became the “aberrant citizens” that the new nation-state needed to render invisible since they did not fit into its moralistic frame of nationality. As Smith argues, “the state regulated its national imaginary; it promoted a national identity that privileged Catholic morality and valorized the correlation between marriage and motherhood while at the same time effacing nonconforming citizens who were institutionally confined.” (47)

Some early reports, such as “The Carrigan Report” (1935) and the “Criminal Act Justice” (1960), reveal the strong complicity of the State and the Church. Catholic Orders received strong support from the political elite, direct and indirect, and the religious community gained a strong social and cultural authority. Although the presence of prostitution diminished in the twentieth century, moral vigilance intensified and encompassed any other circumstance or person seen as

“sinful” and that could become “contagious”. This is why sexually active single women, adulterers, ‘women perceived to be in danger of losing their virginity’, or those who had ‘marked tendencies toward sexual immorality’ became threats for family respectability and a danger for the entire society (Titley 8). The partnership between the state and the Church, as Smith points out, increased the punitive aspect of the Magdalene asylums, which replaced its original purpose: “The state’s complicity in this transformation goes beyond turning a blind eye, or failing to intervene and protect the constitutional rights of countless citizens. The state [...] was an active agent and willing partner in the operation of the nation’s Magdalene laundries” (47).

In *The Magdalene Sisters*, Mullan depicts the participation of the State and a societal framework that not only witnessed the Church’s oppression inflicted on the girls, but also supported it. The role of society in the systematization of a punitive and carceral morality as shown in the film helps Mullan to contrast it to the current circumstances of the Irish people. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the conversation has changed and public opinion regarding religion and the Church has suffered a gradual decline since the 1990s.

The film appears at a critical moment for the Catholic Church and contributes to the general criticism that increased due to a series of scandals. As I mentioned before, Ireland became known as the Celtic Tiger because of its growing economy. This reinforced a strong separation from the Church, from past policies that supported isolationism and tradition. The film represents a “lucky escape,” turning over a new leaf, a “separation between past and present, between the dark old days and Celtic Tiger Ireland”<sup>42</sup> (Smith 138).

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<sup>42</sup> As indicated in the introduction, the disappearance of the Celtic Tiger can open a current critical interrogation of the assumptions that derived from it. Here, for example, becomes valid to observe in more detail if it Smith’s conception of the Celtic Tiger actually means to leave behind “dark old days.” This direction is now open for discussion.



The 1990s marked a crucial moment for the Church in Ireland. Cases such as Bishop Casey in 1992 or Fr. Brendan Smyth in 1994, together with TV series and films (*States of Fear*, RTÉ, 1999), books, and other cultural productions, all contributed to what Thomas Bartlett calls the “fall of the Catholic Church” (534) in Ireland. Not only the Celtic Tiger, but also the empowerment of women and increasing secularization in the last decades of the twentieth century reduced people’s reverence for the clergy (Bartlett 535). Other events that modified the Church’s presence in society included affordable travel, the phenomenon of economic immigration, and the growth of a multicultural social body. Ireland changed the conception of itself radically: It moved “from defining itself as a peripheral, essentially moral community to a modern, liberal and ultimately secular society” (Guy 27).

Seven years after the release of *The Magdalene Sisters*, the Report published in 2009 by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, also known as Ryan Report, had an even more significant impact in Irish society. The investigations that started by the end of the 1990s, after several procedural and political issues, came to produce a document that traced the abuse of children in state-owned institutions run by religious orders from the 1930s to the 1970s. The investigators not only explored documents and conducted interviews; they also collected testimonies from at least 1,090 survivors. This detailed report, divided into five volumes with several chapters each, explores with horrific detail the systematic violence with which children were treated in these institutions for decades. The report presents with historical documentation and testimonial excerpts the horrific systematic violence with which children were subjected mostly by religious members of different orders. Irish society stood shocked by this report because it also highlighted that sometimes abuse was reported but mostly ignored, perpetrators were protected by State and the Church, and external witnesses chose to look the other way. This report

becomes a capital document since it reveals the mechanism of organized violence applied to hundreds of children by the Church and the State.

In order to analyze Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* and its critical perspective of the role of the Church, the State, and their violent oppression of bodies, I follow the same classification of terrorization and torture presented in the Ryan Report. According to this Report, there are four different forms of abuse: Physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse. It is possible to find all of these four forms of abuse in the film. In this way, it is possible to observe in the movie, released years before the Report, a clear consciousness of the different types of violence to which imprisoned children were subjugated.

First, the Ryan Report defines physical abuse as "The willful, reckless or negligent infliction of physical injury on, or failure to prevent such injury to, the child" (133). According to witnesses, many forms of physical abuse took place in the institutions: From being beaten and having their head knocked against walls, to being swung off the ground by the hair and or burned.<sup>43</sup> In the film, it is possible to find several scenes that show physical abuse (see Figures 31 and 32).



Figures 31 and 32: Physical abuse.

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<sup>43</sup> The Ryan Report describes: "The form of physical abuse by witnesses ranges from being smacked on the hand to being beaten naked in front of others. They described being hit, slapped, beaten, kicked, pushed, pinched, burned, bitten, shaken violently, physically restrained, and force fed. The Committee also heard reports of witnesses having their heads knocked against walls, desks and window ledges, being beaten on the soles of their feet, the backs of their hands, around their heads and ears, having their hair pulled, being swung off the ground by their hair, and made to perform tasks that they stated put them at risk of harm and danger." (135)

For example, after “misbehaving”, both Crispina and Bernadette are taken to see the Mother Superior. She does not hear excuses nor show any sympathy for the girls. She asks them to turn around and expose the back of their legs, grabs a stick and hits them. In a later shot, the camera shows Bernadette’s legs where the marks of this punishment are clearly visible.

Another form of physical abuse described by many survivors consists on shaving the girl’s hair almost completely, a punishment applied especially to those that attempt to escape. Ida, a young girl who escapes and is later forcefully taken back by her own father, suffers this punishment. Bernadette fails in her attempt to run away and is punished by the nuns. Mother Superior cuts her hair with scissors. The camera moves rapidly and the cuts of close-ups are abrupt, which intends to translate cinematically the pain and resistance of the character. When finished, the nun asks Bernadette to look at herself in the mirror. There is blood in her face. This practice aims to make the punished girl be recognized in any public space, a form of humiliation in and destruction of her own identity – her own “world”, as Scarry would call it (see Figures 33 and 34). In fact, Mother Superior tells Bernadette: “I want you to see yourself as you really are. Now that your vanity is gone and your arrogance is defeated you are free. Free to choose between right and wrong. Look into your soul, find what is decent and pure to offer to God. Then and only then you’ll find salvation”



Figures 33 and 34: Making Bernadette a docile “Catholic girl.”

Her words become an example of “subjectification” or “interpellation as subject”, as Althusser presents it (188); a moment in which the apparatus exercises its power in order to shape a particular subject to control. Her words intend to make her a docile Catholic girl. But unlike Ida, who suffers the same punishment and ends up promising her life to penance and work in the laundry, Bernadette does not listen and tries to escape again. This scene shows both the ideological and repressive character of the Religious apparatus, and the body as the recipient of the violent “interpellation”.

Secondly, the Ryan Report describes the systematic sexual abuse to which children were subjected to in the religious institutions. The document defines it as “the use of the child by a person for sexual arousal or sexual gratification of that person or another person” (150), and presents different types of sexual abuse reported by the witnesses (vaginal and anal rape, and inappropriate contact, among others).<sup>44</sup> In the film, Mullan particularly shows two scenes that include sexual abuse. In the first one, two nuns have taken a group of girls and asked them to stand naked next to each other (see Figures 35 and 36).



Figures 35 and 36: Humiliation and sexual abuse.

The nuns make them move and later compare their sexual organs and the quantity of pubic hair, calling this “a game.” They make fun of the girls’ body parts and humiliate them in front of

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<sup>44</sup> The Report expands: “Witnesses reported sexual assaults in the forms of vaginal and anal rape, oral/genital contact, digital penetration, penetration by an object, masturbation and other forms of inappropriate contact, including molestation and kissing. Witnesses also reported several forms of non-contact sexual abuse including indecent exposure, inappropriate sexual talk, voyeurism and forced public nudity.” (151)

others. By the end of the scene, Crispina cries and the nuns decide that the game is over. The use of both close-ups and full body shots that show nudity highlights the contrast between intimacy and exposure in this scene.

Another example of sexual abuse in the film takes place when the girls go to the chapel. Margaret stops to tie her shoe's laces and sees Crispina performing oral sex on a priest. Once in the chapel, Crispina joins the others and the priest starts mass. The camera later traces a parallelism between the sexual abuse and the act of Eucharist. The proximity of both scenes highlights a critical point by which the symbolism of the ritual is contrasted with the perverse act of the sexual abuse. The idea of the "sacred flesh" of Christ that Crispina receives clashes with the "carnal act" of sex previously shown by the camera. In this way, the film reveals not only the violent forms of subjugation imprinted on the girls' bodies, but also the hypocrisy of the institution in regard of its own discourse of morality. This is also remarked by the priest own words when he starts mass: "Judge me, oh God, and distinguish my call for a nation that is not holy. Liberate me from the unjust and deceitful men."

The series of close-ups of all the penitent girls that receive the host, the repetition of the phrase "body of Christ" uttered by the priest, and Crispina's facial expression that simulates pleasure, also highlight the contrast between the moral discourse and the abuse performed by the religious members (see Figures 37 and 38).



Figures 37 and 38: Sexual abuse and the Eucharist in parallel.

Third, the film depicts neglect, defined in the Ryan Report as: “Failure to care for the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental health or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his or her behavior or welfare.” (161) Neglect refers to both action and inaction by religious staff and other adults who hold some responsibility over the health of children. The Report classifies different forms of neglect, which also overlap other forms of abuse. The areas of neglect presented are food, clothing, heat, hygiene, bedding, healthcare, education, supervision, and preparation for discharge (163). Particularly in the film, Mullan presents in different scenes various types of neglect. Some scenes show the disparity of the quality of food that the girls consume (a sort of white paste) compared to the one that the nuns have (toasts, tea, marmalade, etc.). Also, some residents get sick and receive no care from the religious members: Crispina gets the flu and passes out during breakfast. One of the nuns just asks Margaret to take her to bed. Another resident, an old woman who has spent all her life in the laundry, suddenly becomes sick, and she is taken to a bedroom with no further care. Just Bernadette checks on her, changes her sheets, and tells her: “Nobody cares.”

Finally, the last form of abuse presented in the Ryan Report is emotional abuse. This is defined as “Any other act or omission towards the child which results, or could reasonably be expected to result, in serious impairment of the physical or mental health or development of the child or serious adverse effects on his or her behavior or welfare.” (176) As witnesses describe, this sort of abuse refers to different practices that “failed to recognize the individual needs of children and provide adequately for their care.”<sup>45</sup> (176) It is possible to find some of these practices in the film. First of all, the creation of an environment of fear and terror is sustained not only by

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<sup>45</sup> The Report expands the description in the following manner: “Practices in relation to personal care, the separation of siblings, and enforced isolation and silence were reported as part of rigid institutional system. A further component of emotional abuse described by witnesses referred to the constant physical and verbal abuse that engendered a culture of fear”. (176)

physical violence, but also verbal abuse. The girls are called “stupid”, “lunatics” and “whores” repeatedly in the film. A practice described in the Ryan Report that the film also shows is the modification of the name of some residents. When Rose arrives, Mother Superior asks her name and then says that there is a “Rose” already in the laundry. She calls her “Patricia”. Later in the film, when she finally escapes and finds herself again free and part of society, she affirms “My name is Rose.” We also learn at the end of the film that Crispina’s real name is Harriet. One of the nuns, as Crispina herself explains, gave her that name due to her “curly hair” (referring to her pubic hair).

The four different types of abuse explained in the Ryan Report could be easily identified in *The Magdalene Sisters*, which indicates the film’s proximity to historical facts. The body, at different moments and in different ways, is subjected to the violent form of oppression applied by the religious apparatus. From the very beginning, the film exposes the religious discourse as the ideological justification of the violent practices exercised by the institution. When Rose, Bernadette, and Margaret arrive, Mother Superior explains the constitution and functioning of the asylum. It is possible to note in her words how the body must be “purified” by pain and exhausting hard work. Their soul becomes “clean” by cleaning the dirtiest clothes in town. She explains:

The philosophy here in Magdalene is very simple. Through the powers of prayer, cleanliness and hard work the fallen find their way back to Jesus Christ, our savior. Mary Magdalene, patron of our convent, was a sinner of the worst kind, and offered her flesh to the depraved and lustful for money. Salvation came only by being penitent for her sins, denying herself all pleasures, including food and sleep and working beyond human endurance to offer her soul to God and go through the gates of Heaven and live an everlasting life. In our laundry there are no simple clothes or bedding, these are the hard means to clean your very soul to remove the stains of the sins you have committed. Here you can redeem yourself and let God save yourself from eternal damnation.

Mullan contrasts Mother Superior’s speech with two sets of images: First, the nun’s detailed care for money. Several close-ups show the books and the organization of bills on the

desk. Second, the camera shows the residents working in the laundry at each stage: Scrubbing, rinsing, and hanging the clothes to dry. This contrast not only reveals the Church's obsession with material wealth, as Mullan himself explains (Crowdus 29), but also the strong proximity of religious discourse and economy. As developed in the following section, it is possible to observe a strong connection between Christianity and the exploitation of Capitalism. The religious discourse makes the body devoid of its value and material meaning; the body then becomes the perfect means for exploitation by and subjugation to a system that depends on this. The parallel reference established by the film in this scene also makes Agamben's *oikonimia* visually perceivable.

Most of the girls, like Una, incorporate the religious discourse and give in to the economic exploitation of the laundry. Others, like Bernadette, question the validity of the religious discourse and observe its use only to justify the violent oppression. When Rose tells Bernadette that having a baby before marriage "is a mortal crime," Bernadette replies, "No mortal sin justifies this place." The characters use "crime" and "sin" indistinctly as if they were synonyms, in order to demonstrate how Christian moral rules become laws in this context and religious asylums, prisons.

An important aspect that the film successfully highlights is the participation of other social apparatuses in the validation and continuation of the laundries' functioning. The "architecture of containment" and "indictment" is revealed at different points, especially when it shows the strong network between State institutions and religious orders: The orphanage where Bernadette first lived and its close relations with the Magdalene asylum; the participation of the Church in the process of adoptions; the connections with hospitals, like the one where Crispina is sent; the business established with people from town; etc.



Yet, the most relevant connection between apparatuses that the film highlights is the one with the Family. In most of the girls' stories it is possible to observe how their patriarchal families have decided their destiny: Margaret is taken by the priest with both her father and mother's consent; Rose's child is taken while her father holds her and her mother leaves. The clearest example of the family's participation is shown when Una's own father brings her back to the asylum. He tells her: "You have no home. You have no mother. You have no father. You killed us both." This scene shows how family honor "rested on the pureness of women" and how the family was often blamed "for allowing young women to fall prey to unnatural worldly temptations." (McGrath 3) The film depicts a strong patriarchal society, in which men most often exercise power. As Smith indicates, *The Magdalene Sisters* "signals how Irish society, men in particular, benefited from these institutions' existence and underscores the societal inertia that adamantly refused to question their *raison d'être*" (144). Men decide the girls' confinement to the asylum, men sexually abuse them, men's business depends on the girls' exploitation, and men call them "lunatics" or "sluts."

An important scene where society's participation appears is in the Corpus Christi ceremony. On this day, the girls are nicely dressed and taken in a procession to the town. The police follow them, as if they were criminals or as if it were necessary to contain them from contact with other people. The construction of this scene is based on photographic material of a Corpus Christi procession in Dublin in 1960 (see Figures 39 and 40).



Figures 39 and 40: The film and the original photography of the Corpus Christi in Dublin (1960).

In the film, Mullan's camera captures people's disqualification of the girls by framing how women look at them. This scene, the only one that shows the girls' contact with the outside world, addresses "the issue of the national guilt" (Brereton 326) and the Irish society's collective culpability in the mistreatment and exploitation of hundreds of women.

Although some aspects of the film have been highly criticized (the extreme romantization that leads to partial critical understanding, the simplification of the nuns' characterizations, the use of stereotypes, the alignment to Hollywood's scheme to obtain international recognition and distribution, etc.), Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters* provides an interesting insight into the functioning of the Magdalene laundries at its most severe time: 1960s Ireland. It also makes visible the strong connection between religious discourse and economic exploitation, which reveals the "management" or *oikonomia* that Agamben observes as defining for all apparatuses. It exposes various types of violence and abuse inflicted on the women's bodies, as the Ryan Report presented years later. The film reveals the infliction of pain on the body, which lastly denounces the mechanism of violence applied by the Church and contributes to its public disqualification that started at the end of the twentieth century. The experience of the Magdalene laundries' residents, like that of many other children who lived in reformatory and industrial schools run by religious orders, represents one of the most painful episodes in Irish history, still felt by its society. It is a pain that requires "recognition", as Moscoso explains. Maybe the film can be seen as a palliative, a product to soothe a very alive open wound.

### **Pain, Religious Discourse, and Slavery: Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena***

In 1976, Gutiérrez Alea presented his first color film: *La última cena*; a film that would later be recognized as one of the best of his entire career. After the success of *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1968), Gutiérrez Alea became one of the most significant and privileged

filmmakers in Cuba. Since his early participation in ICAIC (Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos), he made his cinema a means to think about and continue constructing the idea and the objectives of the Revolution. In 1976 particularly, *La última cena* depicted an important concern that many other filmmakers approached in their own way: The role of Afro-Cuban culture, religion, and history in the Revolution. In this section, I focus my analysis on the strong relationship between religious discourse, its implication in the mechanism of oppression applied in the colonial sugar plantation, and the body in pain. By showing pain and violence, the film exposes the modes in which the religious apparatus served to control and administer bodies. At the same time, the film, in its moment of production, reinforces the capital role of Afro-Cuban culture and history in the ideals of the Revolution. These objectives are found in the way the movie configures three different “martyrs”: Two false Christs (the overseer and the Count) who deceive and use the religious discourse to make the slaves’ bodies material for exploitation; and one more “syncretic” (Sebastián) who not only reinforces the presence of African religion in Cuba, but also represents the idea of the one that will carry out the Revolution and bring freedom.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s cinema can be seen as a production that has transitioned from a clear support of the ideals of the Revolution (his first fictional film *Historias de la Revolución*, 1960) to a critical and analytical position of its basis and faults. In this last group, one could find films such as *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, *Muerte de un burócrata* (1966), and *Hasta cierto punto* (1983); these are films in which characters struggle to find themselves within a system that seems not able to include or understand them. On this same page are his last two productions: *Fresa y chocolate* (1993) and *Guantánamera* (1995). Here Gutiérrez Alea not only discusses the role and space for homosexuality in the Revolution, but also once again presents the danger of bureaucracy. This quote of criticism, as he himself explains, should not be read as antagonism: “I’m a critic, but

I'm not a dissident" (Chanan "We are losing...", 53). He is considered an "eclectic intellectual" of the Revolution (Alcázar Garrido 129), a "doubly *comprometido*" that defends the Revolution abroad while he criticizes it in Cuba. As Schroeder explains, Gutiérrez Alea "does not promote uniformity or any kind of monolithic worldview. What is uniform throughout his filmography is the desirability of an idealized revolutionary process" (4). His critical view though was not always directed to the government, its ideas or mistakes, but also to all institutions and social classes that oppose or attempt to destroy the development of a successful Revolution, e.g. *Las doce sillas* (1962) and *Los sobrevivientes* (1979). Particularly, the Catholic Church and the radicalization of its beliefs are represented in this same manner in these films and in others like *Una pelea cubana contra los demonios* (1971) and *La última cena*.

Based on an episode presented by the Marxist historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals in his *El ingenio* (*The Sugarmill*, 1964), who worked as a consultant during the production, *La última cena* represents the life of a group of slaves on a sugar plantation at the end of the eighteenth century. The Count, the owner of the plantation and one of the main characters, returns to his properties during Holy Week to check on the production and to reinforce his authority. On Holy Thursday, he decides to recreate the Biblical episode of the last supper and invites twelve of his slaves to enjoy food and wine. The day before, a runaway slave, Sebastián, has been caught and the Count decides not only to invite him, but also to sit him at his right hand. During supper, the longest scene of the film (50 minutes total), the Count converses with the slaves and explains to them the meaning of the entire ceremony. The slaves' behavior and questions show a clear contrast with the Count's class: They eat with their hands, they sing and dance while telling stories; some of them were cannibals in Africa; some pay extreme respect and show admiration, etc.<sup>46</sup> The day after, on

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<sup>46</sup> The film shows the group of slaves as a diverse group with different national origins, languages, and beliefs. They are not framed as a monolithic group.

Good Friday, the slaves refuse to work even after the overseer threatens them with severe punishment. They explain that the Count gave them the day off for religious reasons. The overseer does not listen, and the slaves kill him and start a rebellion. The Count, warned by the plantation's priest, imposes order with an army and condemns to death all of the slaves that took part in the supper. The plantation's guards catch all of them, except Sebastián, who succeeds in escaping.

The film presents the story of a singular plantation in which a climate of slave rebellion and insurrection is perceivable. This sense of awareness for slaves' revolts haunted the entire Caribbean region at this time. During the Count's visit to the plantation, Don Gaspar (or Monsieur Duclé, the French name that the Count uses to call him) shows him some of his technical ideas to improve the production and purify sugar. After his experience in Saint Domingue, Don Gaspar knows that an increase of slaves would definitely lead to a rebellion, as had happened in Haiti (Haitian Revolution, 1791-1804). He warns the Count and the overseer, but they do not listen. Several events that took place during this century created a sense of general fear for the plantation owners. As Linebaugh and Rediker explain,

The overturning of several colonies by insurrection seemed a real possibility in the 1730s and 1740s. During these years a furious barrage of plots, revolts, and war ripped through colonial Atlantic societies like a hurricane. No respect of national or imperial boundaries, this cycle of rebellion slashed through British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish territories, which stretched from the northern reaches of South America through the West Indies to the southern colonies and then port cities of North America. (193)

Gutiérrez Alea's interest in colonial history is not unique in the context of 1970s cinematic production in Cuba. In fact, many filmmakers such as Sergio Giral (*El otro Francisco*, 1974; *Maluala*, 1979; *Ranchedor*, 1979), Sara Gómez (*De cierta manera*, 1974), and others, presented films that explored the role, culture, religion, and history of Afro-Cubans. Since the beginning of the Revolution, the issue of racism and discrimination became an important concern. Historical research that focused on the colonial past and slavery became preponderant in the cultural

discourse during the first three decades of the Revolution, which had an implication in the cinematographic production in the 1970s (Testa 1). However, many critics have pointed out that racism in Cuba during the Revolution is actually more complex and contradicts the assumption of the success of its eradication. As de la Fuente affirms, this represents an ongoing debate that can be summarized in the following way:

The first possible position is that the revolution inherited and solved the racial problem. A second group argues that the revolution did inherit a racial problem, but has reinforced it or, at least, has failed to achieve racial equality. A third group recognizes that the revolution has had a positive impact on race relations, but argues that pre-revolutionary Cuban society had already opened paths of social advancement for blacks and that there was a long term trend toward 'racial integration' in the country. Finally, there are those who assert that Cuba was a basically racist and racially unequal country before 1959 and that, although the revolution has had a strong impact on race relations and has eradicated the most important aspects of inequality, some forms of racism and discrimination still persist. The racial problem, they argue, has not yet been completely solved" (132-133).

Indeed, many critics confront their views in several texts, either defending the achievements of the Revolution or presenting its biggest failures. It is not my aim in this section to resolve this conversation nor to contribute to it, but rather to observe that the thematic trend of slavery and race in Cuban cinema in the 1970s had a political agenda in terms of a broader political concern.

It is important to note that several events in this decade affected the government of the Revolution negatively and ended that first period of enthusiasm and euphoria during the 1960s: The cultural crisis due to poet Heberto Padilla's arrest and detention for his literary work in 1971; the failure to achieve 8.5 million tons of sugar in the harvest of 1970; the creation and later dismantling of the work camps UMAP during 1965-1968; and finally, a recession in 1976 that "disappointed hopes of satisfying the material needs of the population" (Ayorinde 85) were some of those events. The 1970s were difficult years for the Revolution, and its cultural production suffered highly for its simplification and apology to the government. As Chanan affirms, only

cinema and music had a “spirit of renovation”. Thanks to ICAIC, cinema had some influence on cultural politics (*Cuban Cinema*, 314).

Then, a cinematic trend explored, analyzed, and valued the history, culture, and religion of Afro-Cubans. This group of filmmakers not only intended to mitigate the crisis that the Revolution faced, but also expanded and reaffirmed its revolutionary ideals to a social sector historically excluded. In this way, Cuban cinema that focuses on Afro-Cuban legacy followed the cultural and historical wave of academic research, contributed to the political aim to eradicate racism, and palliated a moment of strong criticism for the Revolution and its political basis.<sup>47</sup>

One of the aims of *La última cena* is to value the historical role of African religion in Cuban culture. The slaves’ beliefs, mythology, spirituality, and behavior (one of them dances and sings while telling a story during the supper) reveal the important presence of an African religiosity and worldview. But this clashes with European Christianity, represented by the Count, the priest, and all those that rule the plantation. The film becomes a space for a constant struggle between these two religious conceptions; it portrays a “dialectical”<sup>48</sup> relation in which two cultures clash and become a new one.<sup>49</sup> I focus in particular on the mode in which Gutiérrez Alea’s film represents

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<sup>47</sup> More recently, an Afro-Cuban filmmaker herself, Gloria Rolando, made her film about the massacre of 1912 emphasizing a contemporary perspective of an Afro-Cuban woman in contemporary Cuba: *Raíces de mi corazón* (2001).

<sup>48</sup> Gutiérrez Alea defined his idea of cinema as a means to create “dialectics” for the spectator. His ulterior aim was to construct a spectator able to think critically about the film and his/her own reality. His films then become an example of a struggle between different intellectual and spiritual conceptions of the world; a place for political interchange; an encounter of ideas that would make the viewer aware of his/her own. As Gutiérrez Alea explains in his *Dialéctica del espectador*: “El cine será más fecundo en la medida en que empuje al espectador hacia una más profunda comprensión de la realidad y consecuentemente, en la medida en que lo ayude a vivir más activamente, en la medida en que lo incite a dejar de ser un mero espectador ante la realidad” (21).

<sup>49</sup> It is possible to confront this with Ortiz’s concept of “transculturation.” It occurs when two or more cultures are in process of adapting parts of each other, over time, and repeatedly. It is dialogic rather than “dialectal,” with all of the colonial hegemonic components at play as well. It implies a process of de-culturation (dis-adjustment) and a-culturation or in-culturation (re-adjustment); and then, a synthesis: transculturation. “[E]l vocablo transculturación [expresa] los variadísimos fenómenos que se originan en Cuba por las complejísimas transmutaciones de culturas que aquí se verifican, sin conocer las cuales es imposible entender la evolución del pueblo cubano, así en lo económico

Christianity as a discourse that sustains the violent oppression, exploitation, and subjugation of black slaves. The film reveals the role of Christian discourse in the infliction of pain and torture on slaves' bodies, which not only denounces the outrageous role of the Church in the colonial period, but also implies the endurance of Afro-Cuban culture and its revolutionary tradition.

In 1997 the Argentine philosopher, León Rozitchner, published *La cosa y la cruz: Cristianismo y Capitalismo*, in which he analyzes the role of the Christian discourse in the consolidation of capitalism in the Western world. Christianity has had an important role in the success of capitalism, promoting a particular human model that benefits the "Capital's interest". In order to make this point clear, Rozitchner takes as a premise one statement that Augustine of Hippo proposed in his *Confessions*: "mediante el ahorro en carne podréis invertir en espíritu" (12) [by economizing/save/being frugal with the flesh, you will be able to invest in Spirit]. The body, devalued by Christianity, becomes the key element for the "undifferentiated labor" of Capitalism. Christianity has played the role of mediator between Capitalism and the body, constructing an efficient subjectivity lacking in sensitivity. As Rozitchner develops, Christian discourse transforms the body into a residue of the pure and abstract Spirit, which make it extremely useful for the calculation and exploitation by the Capital:

Se necesitó imponer primero por el terror una premisa básica: que el cuerpo del hombre, carne sensible y enamorada, fuese desvalorizado y considerado un mero residuo del Espíritu abstracto. Sólo así el cuerpo pudo quedar librado al cómputo y al cálculo; al predominio frío de lo cuantitativo infinito sobre todas las cualidades humanas. (10)

[First, it was necessary to impose by terror a basic premise: man's body, sensitive flesh and filled with love, had to be devaluated and considered a mere residue of the abstract Spirit. Only by this way, the body could be liberated to count and calculation, to the cold predominance of the quantitative infinite over all human qualities]

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como en lo institucional, jurídico, ético, religioso, artístico, lingüístico, psicológico, sexual y en los demás aspectos de la vida" (93)



This argument for Christianity's strong relationship with capitalism and capitalistic exploitation can also be found exemplified in *The Magdalene Sisters*. As we previously saw, in the speech given by Mother Superior to the girls to whom she explains the functioning of the institution and the story of Mary Magdalene, she reinforces the idea of the body as something that must be constrained, repressed, and dedicated to hard work in the laundry. This fits into Rozitchner's argument. The role of the religious discourse to make the body "devoid of spiritual meaning" and transform it into material for capitalistic exploitation can be also traced in Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena*. Just as in *The Magdalene Sisters*, the representation of Christian discourse is also accompanied by the infliction of pain to make bodies docile and force them to work.

In the film, violence and the institutional mechanism of oppression are represented by the mulato/guajiro overseer, Don Manuel. In several scenes, Don Manuel acts violently towards slaves, forcing them to follow his instructions. One of the most important scenes in this regard takes place after Sebastián is caught and taken back to the plantation. The overseer punishes him in front of everybody, including the priest and the Count, by cutting off his ear and feeding it to the dogs. Although the priest and the count have previously complained about Don Manuel's sadistic method of dealing with the slaves, his "debauchery," they do not react. Instead they watch passively. The most striking scene that symbolically shows the Church's support of violent means to impose its ideology and imagery occurs at the end of the film. Once almost all of the slaves have been hunted down and beheaded, the Count orders someone to put the heads on stakes next to a site that will be used to build a new church. Gutiérrez Alea's camera captures in a single shot both the set of slaves' heads and a Christian cross.

This shot comprises the inherent violence of the religious institution during colonial times, which subsequently approves slavery. The camera pulls back and up and reveals the entire scenario

of violence and Christianity (see Figures 41 and 42). As West explains, “[t]his single camera movement, ending in an omniscient, high-angle long shot, visually and definitively links a symbol (the cross) of the dominant ideology to the macabre fruits it reaps (the severed heads) [...]” (131).



Figures 41 and 42: Violence and the religious institution.

The connection of slavery’s violent management of bodies with religion is also referred to the morning of Good Friday (Day of Christ’s torture and death in public, which also asserts institutional power of the Roman Empire). When the overseer forces slaves to work, the priest tries to convince him to stop by saying that his actions will make him responsible for whatever happens. The overseer, looking straight to the priest’s eyes, responds: “¿Y usted, padre? ¿Hasta qué punto usted no es responsable por lo que aquí puede pasar?” [And you, father? Aren’t you also responsible for events here?] The point of this dialogue, along with the images of the heads in the film, is to reveal the high level of hypocrisy in the Church. The film’s emphasis is centered on the hypocrisy “que subyace tras ‘el espíritu cristiano’ que encarna la burguesía y cómo ésta, a la larga, responde siempre a sus intereses materiales.” (Fornet 223) [that underlies the ‘Christian spirit’ that bourgeoisie embodies and how this, in the end, always responds to its own material interests.]

The mode in which religious discourse supports the violent mechanism applied by the overseer also appears in the longest scene of the film: The supper. In this fifty-minute scene, Gutiérrez Alea displays uses of camera angles to create a dynamic exchange of ideas, emotions, and stories between the Count and his twelve slaves. After explaining the Biblical meaning of the

supper, the Count listens to some stories by the slaves and later, after drinking a good amount of wine, proposes to tell another story himself. Driven by his emotions, he tells the story of Saint Francis of Assisi and explains what the source of happiness is for this Saint. According to the Count, Saint Francis said that happiness lies in bearing cold, hunger, and cruelty with patience and joy. Later, the Count expands:

[D]e todas las cosas buenas del espíritu santo que Cristo concede a sus amigos, la mejor es saber vencerse a uno mismo y soportar penas, injurias y oprobios por amor a Cristo. Porque todas las demás cosas buenas no son nuestras, sino de Dios. Y a él se las debemos. Pero el dolor es lo único verdaderamente nuestro. Y eso es lo único que nosotros podemos ofrecer a Dios con alegría.

[Of all good things Christ gives to his friends, the best is to defeat oneself and suffer pain and injury for his divine love. For all good things are not ours, they belong to God. But pain is the only thing that is really ours. And that's the only thing we can offer to God with joy.]

Clearly the Count's story attempts to convince slaves' to accept their condition and punishment without hesitation or rebellion. Pain must be endured as a natural consequence, an opportunity to become good Christians. But the slaves do not understand or agree with the Count. In fact, they laugh and one of them replies: "When the overseer beats me, should I be happy?" This contrast is later highlighted when the Count, drunk, falls asleep and Sebastián, who has remained silent during the entire dinner, recounts part of the Yoruba myth of creation where Olofi created Truth and Lie. What this counter-mythological story implies is the falseness of the Count and all his religious beliefs. For the Count, the meaning of Saint Francis' story and the entire Biblical charade is to reaffirm his condition as master, to continue enjoying his privileges with a clear and pious consciousness, and to deliver an ideological construct to defend his material interests (Havard 62). His humility and suffering are false. Morris explains: "His performance, an experiment in Christian rhetoric and symbolism, is articulated in a way that intends to bring about the slaves' submission and increase production" (31). Here we see in the Count's story of pain and

suffering as the objective of converting the body into a material devoid of spiritual value that one must offer to God/Capitalistic exploitation.

However, Gutiérrez Alea utilizes Christian discourse and symbolism to place on black slaves a deep revolutionary character. Throughout the film, the figure of Christ seems to manifest itself through different characters throughout the film. First, by recreating some Biblical events during Holy Week, the Count seems to become a Christ. He washes and kisses the slaves' feet, and provides food and drink at the supper while explaining the meaning of the ceremony. He also affirms that it is not bad that a master "humiliates" himself before his slaves/disciples. His performance though creates a clear contrast between the figure of Christ and the Count. A second "martyrdom" is represented later in the film. During Good Friday, once the slaves start to riot, to burn the plantation, and escape, the Count returns and finds the overseer dead. The priest kneels and prays. Then, the Count asks: "Father, what time did Christ die?" The priest responds: "This very hour". Here the figure of Christ passes to the overseer, as if he has sacrificed himself, as if he were the "martyr" of the oppressive system of slavery.

The Count's performance and dialogues construct these two "martyrs" (the Count himself and the overseer). But there is one final configuration that the film develops at the end. After eleven of the twelve guests have been decapitated, the camera shows that one of the stakes is empty. Then, in the next scene, we see Sebastián running away. The film shows a series of images of rocks, water, animals, and plants, marking a sort of parallel between Sebastián and nature. This scene implies that Sebastián has returned to nature and that his revolutionary objective has been achieved. He has finally escaped.

This is not the first time that Sebastián seems to embody super-natural skills. In a conversation with Don Gaspar, the overseer confesses that there is nothing that can control

Sebastián and that he “must have a special power.” From the very beginning Sebastián appears different from the rest. He is the only one personally chosen by the Count for the supper, the one who sits next to him and defies the Count by spitting in his face. After telling his mythical story at the supper, Sebastián takes a small bag containing a white powder and explains that this is his special power. With this powder, he becomes trees, rocks, rivers, and animals. Then, the last scene of the film seems to discard the other two false Christs (the Count and the overseer) and shows the real one: Sebastián. He is not only a “rebel” who has been physically punished and initiated a rebellion on the plantation, but he has “transmuted” into natural elements. The empty stake shows that although he is not physically there, he still exists. It remains then the idea that he may also return to save others still prisoners in the plantation.

The configuration of this third martyr becomes extremely relevant. This parallel between Christ and Sebastián shows how Christianity and African religion converge in the film. He becomes a sort of “mystical rebel” for both Christian and Yoruba imagery.<sup>50</sup> But what he mostly represents is the idea of a black revolutionary, who succeeds in defeating the oppressive forces of slavery and capitalist exploitation.<sup>51</sup> He becomes the symbol of the Revolution in the film; he embodies the ideological force that moves others to defy the oppression of the system. Sebastián, as Deaver describes him, becomes a “revolutionary Castro”:

Unlike the other slaves, he is not a comic sycophant prone to dancing and joking for the master’s diversion. Instead, he is a committed revolutionary dedicated to escape, mutiny,

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<sup>50</sup> This configuration of runaway slave can also be traced in Alejo Carpentier’s novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949). This is the trope of the “cimarrón.” The film takes its imagery from Carpentier’s book, in which slave revolt becomes an imagined past where tortured bodies move beyond the limits of materiality, human legibility, and overthrow the social order. It is displayed through a return to nature, sorcery, and violence.

<sup>51</sup> Ayorinde traces a historical reference to the role of Christianity in both colonial slavery and counterrevolutionary interests, which also emphasizes Sebastián’s configuration as “black revolutionary” against slavery and a foreign capitalistic system. Ayorinde explains: “The Afro-Cuban practices were also more truly national than those of any of the other religions. The Catholic clergy was predominantly Spanish during the Republic, and over the centuries the church had sided with the colonial master, the urban elite, and, most recently, foreign counterrevolutionaries. Until 1959, the Protestant churches had been instrumental in the transfer of U.S. values.” (106)

and social upheaval to achieve equality and freedom. As such, he is the harbinger of the Castro Revolution as well as the model citizen committed to *socialismo o muerte*.” (quoted by Havard, 65)

Gutiérrez Alea’s *La última cena* provides a historical revision of Cuba’s colonial slavery, but also configures a strong revolutionary character in Sebastián and all black slaves. This makes the film a powerful cultural artifact that reaffirms the ideals of the Revolution in a moment of profound crisis and to re-inserts Afro-Cubans historically into the revolutionary movement. The film reveals the methods by which Christian discourse makes the body a material for exploitation and violent oppression. In this way, it exposes the religious apparatus’ inherent repressive and ideological character, and makes the black body not only a bearer of pain, but also an effective weapon to initiate and continue a revolution.

### **The Body in Pain, the Sentient Weapon**

As we have seen in this chapter, these artworks represent the pain and torture inflicted by a variety of State apparatuses. In Althusser’s, Agamben’s, and Rozitchner’s theoretical framework, the concept of apparatus involves the violent management of the body. As stated before, the body in pain has an ambivalent structure in the selected artworks: While they represent the body as a surface on which to inscribe suffering, this revelation becomes a “weapon” to expose and attack the apparatuses’ oppression. In this way, it is possible to envisage an entire corporeal dimension in these artworks: Pain becomes something represented in different ways (visual references, dialogues, sonorous elements, rupture of language, etc.). Through these devices, these artworks create a sentient dimension in which pain and suffering become perceivable. In this way, they expose the violent mechanisms with which State apparatuses control and manage bodies. The perception/understanding of the dimension of pain and suffering (i.e. its texture) in these artworks

becomes capital to envisage their political positions in regard of their particular historical and ideological contexts.

In Néstor Perlongher's "El informe Grossman", the narrative voices locate pain in a proximity to sexual pleasure, which exposes not only the Army's violent management of bodies, but also attacks the apparatus's patriarchal character. Homoerotic desire located in bloody suffering, dying bodies or rotten corpses also materializes Perlongher's rejection of a neoliberal gay subjectivity legitimized. Pain, torture, and dead bodies expose those undesirable aspects that remained unseen during the dictatorial government: On one hand, the systematic disappearance of people, and on the other hand, homosexual desire and practices. Perlongher makes the homosexual tortured soldier's body a sensitive and accurate political statement.

Paula Markovitch also refers to the Argentine dictatorship in her film *El premio*. She makes a little girl's body the surface in which the State exercises its violent administration. In this case, the Army and especially the School are the apparatuses that act on her body. The film represents pain in different ways: in visual (open wounds and scabs), or sonorous images (Cecilia's inconsolable weeping), and tactile references (the cold of patio). As in Perlongher's short story, pain here evokes the mode in which State terrorism functioned. Although the film does not directly show torture and violence exercised on adult citizens, *El premio* constructs its main character as a sort of sentient recipient able to perceive and show the physical administration of State power. As in Perlongher's literary piece, the body in pain becomes a means to reveal what "visually" seems to be inexistent.

For Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters*, pain also has an ambivalent structure. As in previously analyzed works, here the film depicts the violence applied by the Church and other apparatuses, like the Family and the Police. It portrays an entire social network that approved and

sustained the systematic use of violence in these institutions. The body in pain, like in Perlongher and Markovitch's works, reflects the forceful management by the Church and denounces its hypocrisy. Since it is possible to find the four kinds of abuse presented in the Ryan Report (sexual, emotional, physical, and neglect), the film has a strong political implication in the re-construction of Irish national identity at the beginning of twenty-first century.

Finally, in Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena*, the same ambivalent structure applies: The black body bears pain inflicted by an institutionalized slavery, approved by the Church. But, at the same time, the wounded black body becomes a re-enactment of the revolutionary spirit. The film not only exposes the Catholic Church's historical hypocrisy, but also reaffirms the Revolution's ideals and includes Afro-Cubans as part of its historical and cultural development.

All of these cultural works represent a similar concern regarding their particular contexts. All of them present a historical revision in a moment of transition into a reconfiguration of national identity. Pain, rotten corpses, sexual pleasure mixed with suffering, and torture, become the sentient tools with which these artworks make their political views more tangible, more present, and in the end, more real. They present a revision of a violent past from a contemporary perspective, which does not have the sole purpose of feeling sorrow once again. On the contrary, re-envisioning the pain of previous generations consolidates the necessity to "reconcile" with past social mistakes and outbursts. Pain, as Moscoso explains, inhabits a liminal space, since its existence implies a separation and requires relief, "reconciliation." These artworks try to soothe and mitigate the urgency of those open wounds that remained alive and felt in collective memories. They become an act of human contact and affective concern with others' suffering, a sympathetic means to lessen pain.



#### CHAPTER 4: EXPERIENCING FILM, EXPERIENCING THE OTHER. BODILY SENSES AND THE INSTITUTIONAL MODE OF REPRESENTATION.

“What is important now is to recover our senses.  
We must learn to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.”  
Susan Sontag

In 1993, the British director Derek Jarman released his film, *Blue*, a few months before his death. The movie consists of a single shot of saturated blue color, accompanied by the director and other actors' voices. This film is Jarman's last statement before dying of AIDS-related complications, in which he attempts to portray his personal experience of losing sight. In fact, the film's voices are Jarman's personal observation of life and memories. By using the color blue, Jarman places the spectator within his own perspective: Losing sight and approaching death equated, to him, to a constant blue that invades vision. Nothing else. No images, nor figures, or forms. Everything is concentrated in the absoluteness of blue. In this film, the aesthetic form is subjugated to a personal encounter, an intimate connection with the director's life (as he neared death). By using a blue screen, Jarman makes his audience experience both his conceptual and sensorial idea of death. He only sees the blue and hears voices; the audience experiences the same.

This film is an example of how cinematographic language can limit the visual hierarchy and gives way to other forms of “viewing” cinema. Watching a film like *Blue* means to “experience” it through corporeal senses and renounce a clear narrative/representational intention. When cinema becomes “cinema of the senses,” the body assumes a privileged position. Here, aesthetic form and embodiment are strongly tied together; blurred images, variations of sound, lighting and shadows, etc. become elements that intend to construct human sensorium through cinematic form. What do we mean by “sensorium”? According to Laura Marks, this can be defined as “the bodily organization of sense experience” (2), our cultural sensitive knowledge that informs our conception, perception, and production of corporeal experiences. In her book *The Skin of Film*

(2000), Marks analyzes several films in which memories and remembrances are constructed by appealing to human senses. As she explains, these films

evoke memories both individual and cultural, through an appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experiences of the senses, such as touch, smell, and taste. [...] These sense experiences are not separate, of course. They combine to form [...] our sensory experiences of place. More fundamentally, they inform each person's sensorium, the bodily organization of sense experience. (2)

Similar to Marks, the challenge in this chapter is to observe how in the selected films, which are an audiovisual media, non-audiovisual sense experiences can be represented (2); and also, how this can be read as a political statement. The human figure, rather than being a point of reference, becomes a means of signification. Unlike previous chapters in which a literary work become also part of the comparison, in this chapter I focus only on cinema in order to envisage more specifically the particular modes in which its language engages politically. I observe how cinematographic language constructs corporeal sensations and offers an aesthetic and political engagement in the embodiment of the form.

Texture and its political implication are particularly related to the ideological role of the aesthetic form in these artworks. By considering the body and corporeal sensorium active agents for both production and spectatorship, these films attempt to offer an alternative for spectators to view cinema. Referring to a spectator aware of his/her corporeal condition does not follow the conditions presented by a certain discourse of power that determines the aesthetic form as something subjugated to capitalist consumption. As we will see, the corporeal dimension in these films is circumscribed to the politics of their aesthetic form.

While vision means the total disposition of figures and narrative development in mainstream cinema, these seem to be problematic, fragmented, or incomplete in the three films analyzed in this chapter: Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel's *La Ciénaga* (*The Swamp*, 2001;

the Irish-British film *The Last September* (1999) directed by Deborah Warner; and the Cuban film *La piscina* (*The Swimming Pool*, 2010) directed by Carlos Quintela. Effectively, for these films, vision becomes incapable of representing a sort of reality that requires other bodily senses to be perceived. These works offer an alternative to the supremacy of “optical visuality” in mainstream cinema – a term coined by Marks that is later explained in this chapter – and intend to construct other forms of experiencing film. In other words, what they invite is a “haptic gaze” – a term used by Gilles Deleuze<sup>52</sup> and fully explored by Marks. As she explains, haptic images ask “the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well” (2). Observing haptic cinema means to consider the body an active means of perception and representation, but it also means renouncing an institutionalized way to encounter cinema. As Martine Beugnet explains, “[letting] oneself be physically affected by an artwork or spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment” (3). Clearly, those films that privilege other bodily senses over sight and make use of haptic images propose an alternative that lies in their aesthetical dimension.

In order to understand the ideological character of hapticity in the three films analyzed in this chapter, it is necessary to refer to Noël Burch’s concept of the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR). By exploring the first films ever made, Burch traces the development of a certain relationship between audience and cinema, the mode in which spectators encounter films. Burch explains how the industrial development of cinema, mainly represented by Hollywood, has developed a certain model for spectators to understand how a movie should be seen, what to expect from it, and what cinema is in the end. Everything we understand as the “naturalized cinematic language” has not always been so; there has been a series of techniques that now define our

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<sup>52</sup> Deleuze borrows this term from Alois Riegl when speaking about Francis Bacon’s work in his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. (1981)

encounter with films that have been created and imposed. In order to reveal this process, Burch goes back to the first films: The silent movies made from the 1900s to the 1920s. The IMR becomes a central concept for understanding the political power in the aesthetic form — more specifically, the cinematographic form. Here, the haptic image plays an important role, because it does not only refer to the body as means of signification and encounter, but also as a political and aesthetical mode that interacts with the consolidated IMR.

Although many aspects may remain distant and disconnected among the three films selected for this chapter, they share a conception of vision and sight as something questionable, something blocked, or unimportant; which gives predominance to other corporeal senses (touch, smell, hearing, and taste). In the case of *La Ciénaga*, the constant use of the off-screen and the particular use of sound create a sense of danger not perceivable by sight. Its director, Lucrecia Martel, utilizes sound and appeals to the sense of touch to emphasize the role of bodies as active perceivers of social conditions. Although much research has been done to point out the film's subtle reference to historical events like the feeling of a post-dictatorial society,<sup>53</sup> the most political aspect of the film lies in its aesthetic conception.

In this sense, *The Last September* directed by Deborah Warner, an adaptation of the novel of the same title by the Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen, presents a similar conception of sight and visibility. As in Martel's work, its cinematographic style seems to concentrate a central idea regarding the political character of the aesthetic form. The camera constantly shows the characters through mirrors, windows, telescopes, or other objects that block or distort a clear perception of figures. Indeed, the use of artificial shadows and lighting as well as camera moves and positions make the filming style equate to what seems to be the ulterior purpose behind the film and the

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<sup>53</sup> Joanna Page, for example, observes strong connections between the disposition of bodies and wounds in the film with the way in which young generations feel and think about a post-dictatorship society.

original novel: The death of a generation, the disappearance of a particular social class (the Anglo-Irish at the end of the independence wars) that do not want to “see” and recognize their imminent end. Or perhaps it represents the distance and the impossibility of looking at and understanding each other, as if the intimate feelings of those that surround each character remain obscure and blocked by a façade. In any case, the film techniques used by Warner in the film show how vision can be distorted and how weak and incomplete sight could be. Like *La Ciénaga*, *The Last September* emphasizes the fallible condition of sight, which represents a more complex interaction with the IMR.

While the Argentine and the Irish films reflect on the limits of the visual nature of cinema, Quintela’s *La piscina* makes a different statement. Here we have characters, young students with different physical disabilities, who spend a single day of their summer vacation in an urban swimming pool. They swim, run, sleep, and make jokes until the end of the day. There is not much more than that. There are no complicated narrative knots or long dialogues. In fact, verbal language remains almost forgotten, as a secondary source of communication. The film deploys a more physical and affective connection between the characters. Little by little, the body and its senses become the most powerful means of communication, and they require the same sort of disposition from the audience. Here the haptic image invades several scenes: The use of sound when they eat and swim permeates the sensation of the bodies that we contemplate during the film. The movie invites a contemplation of sensations experienced by these bodies.

Both Marks and Burch’s concepts of the haptic image and the IMR serve in this chapter to reveal the political aspect of sense and sensation in cinema. Unlike previous chapters where historical or economical elements were referred to in order to illustrate the politics of the body, here the political side of corporeality remains intrinsically in the aesthetic dimension of the works

of art. The corporeal dimension is here political because it offers through the embodiment of the cinematic image an alternative to the visual dominance and its ideological character.

### **Corporeal Shots Are a Question of Morality**

One of the most incisive phrases in film criticism is Jean-Luc Godard's "Le travelling est une affaire du morale" [Tracking shots are a question of morality] (62). This idea was part of a long discussion between several members of the *Cahiers du Cinema* in July 1959. Godard, Domarchi, Kast, Rivette, and Rohmer—among others—discussed the recent film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) directed by Alain Resnais. Godard's point, above all, was that this film demonstrated purely cinematographic techniques, not comparable with any other work of art from another discipline. In fact, he emphasizes this film's uniqueness, stating that it is "devoid of any cinematic references" (59). Godard was trying to prove that cinema had reached a point in which it has reinvented itself, a sort of independence and uniqueness. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* was a clear example. He affirms: "When I said there were no cinematic references, I meant that seeing *Hiroshima* gave one the impression of watching a film that would have been quite inconceivable in terms of what one was already familiar with in the cinema" (59).

Godard's concern with cinematic language was a common thread for the film critics of *Cahiers du Cinema*. In fact, another French critic of this group, Luc Moullet wrote this popular phrase. Moullet also published a short article in defense of Sam Fuller's filmmaking in March 1959 (before the discussion about *Hiroshima*). In the middle of his discussion, Moullet makes this statement: "La morale est une affaire du travelling" [Morality is a question of tracking shots] (148). In a recent interview, Moullet goes back to this article and reflects on the meaning of his proposal, later resumed by Godard. He explains:

Le sens profond du film était défini par la façon dans le film était fait, et non pas par le sujet. [...] Donc c'était la façon dans le film ou l'œuvre était faite qui comptait et qui apportait sa propre morale beaucoup plus que le prêchi-prêcha éventuel des intentions morales de l'auteur. ("Cinema according to Luc")

[The deeper meaning of the film was becoming defined by how a film is made, not by the subject. [...] And so it was the way a film was made that mattered the way it revealed its own morality rather than the preaching of the author's own moral intentions.]

Even though there are some differences in the scope of these two filmmakers' statements, both Moullet and Godard share a clear concern regarding the potential of cinematographic language to express an idea by itself.

In 1961 Jacques Rivette, also a member of *Cahiers du Cinema*, wrote a short article about the movie *Kapò* (1960) by Gillo Pontecorvo in which he discusses a very controversial travelling shot of a suicidal woman in the context of the Holocaust. Rivette uses this movie to think about the inability to dissociate "filming something about the world" and "filming it in a certain way".

He affirms:

disons qu'il se pourrait que tous les sujets naissent libres et égaux en droit ; ce qui compte, c'est le ton, ou l'accent, la nuance, comme on voudra l'appeler - c'est-à-dire le point de vue d'un homme, l'auteur, mal nécessaire, et l'attitude que prend cet homme par rapport à ce qu'il filme, et donc par rapport au monde et à toutes choses : ce qui peut s'exprimer par le choix des situations, la construction de l'intrigue, les dialogues, le jeu des acteurs, ou la pure et simple technique [...] (*filmfilm*)

[Let's say that all topics are born free and with the same rights, but what counts is the tone, the accent, the nuance, or whatever you want to call it. In other words, the point of view of a man, the author, the necessary evil, and the attitude that this individual assumes with respect to what he films and, hence, with respect to the world and all the things: what could be expressed by the selections of the situations, the construction of the plot, the dialogues, the performance of the actors and actresses, or the pure and simple technique (my translation).]

The technique becomes the central aspect that reflects a certain view towards the world, reality, or history. Just a simple travelling shot that tries to contain the total suffering of a prisoner can become problematic, because it shows an ulterior conception of cinema as an art that represents

everything, even the pain of the concentration camps- the unthinkable, the unimaginable. The camera turns into a voyeur, and the suffering, an object to be observed; it becomes a suffering different from the world of the spectator, something that remains in the simple pleasure of looking (see Figure 43). When the camera approaches the dying body in this scene, it is not only implying “look at how she dies, look closely”, but also “let’s make something beautiful of this.”



Figure 43: The suicidal woman in Kapò

Certainly every time a camera films, it records a frame of what is seen. Inevitably, the camera selects from the world, cuts pieces of “reality”, assumes a position, shows something and hides something else. This incapacity to see everything is also a condition of our sight: We cannot see everything with our eyes. As Elaine Scarry affirms when referring to Freud: “Eyeglasses, microscopes, telescopes, and cameras are [...] projected materializations of the human eye” (282). What the camera extends is not only our capacity to see but also our limitations.

So then, one can affirm that the visual supremacy and embellishment of every “tracking shot” (cinematographic language) is a construction that for some reason became part of the “natural” language of cinema. We assume that cinema is above all “visual”. Noël Burch’s study of the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR) seems to have been triggered by *Cahier du Cinema* film critics’ disquisition. According to Burch, cinema language has not always been the same. What one understands today as the “natural language” of film, in reality, is nothing more



than an “institutional” configuration formed during the first years of cinematographic existence.

Burch affirms:

veo a la época 1895 – 1929 como la de la constitución de un Modo de Representación Institucional (MRI), que desde hace cincuenta años es enseñado explícitamente en las escuelas de cine como Lenguaje del Cine; lenguaje que todos interiorizamos desde muy jóvenes en tanto competencia de lectura gracias a una experiencia de las películas [...] universalmente precoz en nuestros días en el interior de las sociedades industriales (17).

[I see the epoch of 1895 – 1929 as the time for the constitution of an Institutional Mode of Representation, that has been explicitly taught for fifty years in film schools as the Language of Cinema; a language that all of us have internalized since a very young age as a reading competence thanks to a film experience [...] universally premature in our days in the interior of industrial societies. (my translation)]

This IMR consists of a series of formal characteristics that allow film narrative to be perceived by the spectator as a “reality,” which creates an “illusion” that completely erases the presence of the audience. Burch explains that it has not always been like this, because cinema has gradually found its language in a particular context: “The capitalist and imperialist Western world during the first quarter of the twentieth century”<sup>54</sup> (17).

One of the most important points described by Burch consists in what he calls the “invulnerability of the spectator” (221). Once the camera started to get closer to the actors and select what specific parts of their bodies to film, the distance from the face started to get shorter too. Hence, the gaze directed to the camera started to mean a direct look into the eyes of each

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<sup>54</sup> Samuel Larson Guerra, who expresses a strong discomfort with the IMR’s visual dominance and its detriment of sound: “Desde la década de los treinta hasta la fecha, estas prácticas técnicas, tanto visuales como sonoras, así como sus consecuentes hábitos ideológicos, se refuerzan y reproducen mutuamente y están totalmente enraizados en el pensar y el quehacer de la industria cinematográfica estadounidense. [...] El problema es que ellos lo han hecho un asunto, si no de todo el mundo, de casi todo, imponiendo sus historias, géneros y su forma de concebir el cine por encima de las demás [...] Este lenguaje cinematográfico [...] es pues un lenguaje hegemónico, conservador, manipulador, maniqueo, colonizador, alienante, etcétera. Y, simultáneamente, muy eficaz, poderoso y atractivo” (186). [From the 1930s until now, these technical practices, both visual and sonorous, as well as their subsequent ideological habits, get stronger and reproduce mutually and they totally take root in the thought and work of the American cinematographic industry. [...] The problem is that they have made this a business for almost the entire world, imposing their stories, genres, and their form of conceiving cinema above other industries [...] This cinematographic language [...] is then an hegemonic, conservative, manipulative, Manichean, colonizer, and alienated language. And, at the same time, very effective, powerful, and attractive].

spectator (220). Due to the ambition of creating the illusion of reality and making a movie understandable by itself, looking straight at the camera became something taboo, something that may reveal the presence of the spectator on the other side of the screen. The “un-embodiment” of the spectator becomes a transcendental element for filmmaking that follows the IMR commands.

The constitution of the IMR and its existence in current cinematographic productions become relevant to the understanding of the aesthetic and ideological proposition in some films that relate differently to it. Then, if a filmmaker appeals to the corporeality of the image, to corporeal senses, he/she offers an alternative to the artificiality of visual supremacy in cinema and advocates for the agency of the spectator as a corporeal subject. Any film that appeals to a more complex, dynamic, and more active corporeal sensorium through cinematic images presents a statement that intends to interact differently with the visual dominance of the IMR.

In this sense, the concept of “haptic image” plays an important role when analyzing Martel, Warner, and Quintela’s films. Although it may sound strange to talk about the implication of other bodily senses in audiovisual material, Laura Marks’ challenge in her study was to observe how this media “can represent non audiovisual sense experiences” (2). She centers her work on what she calls “intercultural cinema,” referring to film and video produced in Western metropolitan centers by new cultural formations as a result of global flows (diaspora, migration, and exile). According to Marks, this group of films represents a particular experience from a minority that reveals cinema’s possible condition of appealing to embodiment. In other words, there is some sort of corporeal memory inscribed in these films that traces a particular history coming from these communities that transcends the audiovisual media and awakes other forms of sensorium. Marks affirms that this becomes possible because perception “is already informed by culture, and so even illegible images are (cultural) perceptions, not raw sensations” (145, parenthesis in original).

According to Marks, if these films can permeate other forms of perception, the visual subjugation of the cinematic image is a construction as well as the act of spectatorship. She explains:

The cinematic encounter takes place not only between my body and the film's body, but my sensorium and the film's sensorium. 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. One could say that intercultural spectatorship is the meeting of two different sensoria, which may or may not intersect. Spectatorship is thus an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge. (153)

Cinema, then, becomes a sensitive means through which one reveals a sort of corporeal understanding to others. The way that something feels for a particular community can be framed in the cinematic image; maybe something impossible to be captured by a visual or verbal construction. This is how Marks comes across with the terms "haptic images" (referring to images offered by cinema, painting, photography, etc.) and "haptic visuality" (the viewer's inclination to perceive them).

In order to illustrate the corporeal condition of hapticity, Marks contrasts it with "optical visuality," which depends on a "separation between the viewing subject and the object" (162). One can affirm that the presence of the "optical visuality" is more akin to the IMR, basically because "optical perception privileges the representational power of the image" (163). The figure must remain visible and subjugated to a narrative development above all. Instead, haptic images work in a completely different way, because they "privilege the material presence of the image" (163).

As Marks explains:

[H]aptic visuality involves the body more than in the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole. [...] The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative. (163)

There is no identification with a particular figure, but an encouragement to develop a "bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (164). While optical cinema presupposes

that everything that the spectator needs is offered in the image, haptic films invite the audience to feel and “inhabit” the image. They propose a different form of interaction with cinema in which corporeal senses become a privileged site of signification. Although this may seem like an innovative side of cinema, Marks refers to Burch and affirms that when films became standardized with the development of the IMR, “cinema appealed more to narrative identification than to bodily identification” (170-171).

It is possible to affirm then that the supremacy of optical visuality in cinema belongs to the development of the so-called IMR. Then, other corporeal possibilities to represent and perceive cinematic images do not completely engage with the language constructed by this institution. The aesthetic decision in films like *Martel*, *Warner*, and *Quintela*’s that sustain the constant appeal to other bodily senses may be observed as political instances in the creative process and political statements in the viewing experience. As I show in the following analysis, there are several instances in which cinema considers a feeling subject on the other side of the screen, an entire sensitive body whose sensorium triggered by different stimulus can develop ulterior concepts. There are some sort of social conditions or historical sentiments that only bodies can perceive – the encounter with the Other(s) or the decadence of an entire social class, for example – that can also be “expressed” through corporeal senses. Rather than talking or showing social circumstances or historical events, films can make us feel them, perceive them on the skin.<sup>55</sup> Rather than making a verbal statement, the films analyzed in this chapter utilize hapticity and the limitations of optical visuality as telling elements in which to locate their ideas.

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<sup>55</sup> As a side note, it is interesting to bear in the mind the etymological connection in Spanish between the words “película” (film) and “piel” (skin). “Película” comes from the Latin *pellicula*. This is the diminutive of the word *pellis*, which is the origin of the term “piel.” Then, the fact that Marks has explored the possibilities of cinema as something that happens through the skin entails a much deeper relation, whose history can be traced within language and etymology.

## The Threat of the Unseen: Lucrecia Martel's *La Ciénaga*

“el cuerpo es la única certeza que uno tiene”  
[the body is the only certainty we have]  
Lucrecia Martel

In 2001, the Argentine director Lucrecia Martel presented her first film, *La Ciénaga*, after receiving an award for her short movie *Rey muerto* [*Dead King*]. *La Ciénaga* shows the lives of two families led by two women: Mecha and Tali. Mecha is a woman in her 50s, married to Gregorio (“a drunk, lazy old man”) and with four teenage children: Momi, José, Verónica and Joaquín. Mecha is the owner of a rural, shabby country home called “La Mandrágora” where they cultivate peppers. An incident (Mecha falls down and injures herself) reconnects her with her cousin, Tali, who lives in the city (called La Ciénaga) with her family: Her husband and four young children (three girls and a young boy named Luciano). The film shows the crowded domestic lives of both homes, exposing present and past tensions (the suspicion of theft committed by the Amerindian maid Isabel, the almost incestuous relationship between Verónica and José, Mecha’s resentment toward Gregorio for his past lovers, etc.) The movie presents a series of domestic scenes that deploy the deep feeling that something threatening will erupt into violence.

From the very beginning, the film produces the idea of watching a horror movie in the spectators: The wrinkled old bodies of Mecha, Gregorio, and their drunk friends dragging lawn chairs by a dirty swimming pool, the music, the sound of the ice in the glasses; all simulate the advent of monsters, zombies, or horrific beings. From the beginning Martel develops a sense of danger using typical elements of film genres like horror and thriller movies. Other scenes from the opening sequence also portray this characteristic of the film: The kids carrying guns, running in the woods, looking for something to hunt. Martel builds the sensation of a threat with no particular (visual) reference. This cinematic technique, named by Aguilar as *acusmática* (acusmatics), refers

to a “sound without a recognizable visual source” (102). As previously explained, optical visuality in Martel’s cinema has a secondary position, because, in *La Ciénaga*, the use of sound and the constant reference to the off-screen (the area that remains outside the cinematographic frame) concentrate the permanent appeal to corporeal senses. By referring to a threatening presence outside the frame, but perceivable by hearing, Martel creates haptic images that require from the spectator a corporeal disposition (a “haptic gaze”).

Indeed, vision and visibility (“Not seeing – not seeing or not being able to see”), as Laura Martins highlights, are central elements of the film (209).<sup>56</sup> In various ways, the film technique is used to construct a sense of threat by referring to the impossibility of seeing. The characters’ vision is blocked or incomplete, like the spectators.’ An example would be the visit to the irrigation channel: On a hot afternoon, the girls go to bathe and see the boys fishing for catfish with machetes. A rush of water that invades the entire shot follows when they become aware of the (unseen) fish swimming around them. For several seconds, the water that “attacks” the characters materializes the tension created by the previous fishing scene. However, the source of the water remains hidden from the frame of the camera: The spectator experiences (hears and sees) what invades the space of the shot, but not its source. Seconds later, the camera shows a big pipe located next to the group of people.

The obstruction of optical visuality, as Martins also points out, allows other forms of perception: A sort of “tactile” quality of the cinematographic image (209). One can perceive the putrefaction of the swimming pool (shots of the dirt and leaves in the turbid water and the sound

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<sup>56</sup> Martins refers to several elements of “obstructed vision”, such as “Mecha mentions her mother-in-law’s blindness, she herself wears sunglasses all the time; her son Joaquín lost an eye in a hunting accident; Luciano dies without anyone seeing it, while paradoxically, his death is the result of wanting to see (he wants to see the invisible dog lurking on the other side of the big wall); Momi insists that ‘she didn’t see anything’ (the final words of the film) as the news broadcasts the story of a devout woman who claims to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary in a water tank” (209).

of flies), the bad smell of the rooms and the taste of food (a constant use of the sound of flies when someone points out a smell or the flavor of food through dialogue), and the heat and humidity of the summer (shots of fans, the sun, summer storms; the constant need of characters to swim or take a shower, etc) (see Figure 44).



Figure 44: Water “invading” the frame.

This is strongly tied to the condition of the bodies: Wounded, tired, sleepy, wrinkled, and also, driven by sexual desire. In this way, the hapticity of the film appears in different forms since optical visibility remains blocked: The characters are not able to see clearly what is going on, what is wrong and how to confront it. They just can “feel” that something bad is going to happen. This also translates to spectators, whose “complete” visual perception gets blocked by the framing of the camera.

The haptic image allows Martel to construct a particular atmosphere: A threatening world inhabited by immutable characters, and invaded by a sense of standstill and decadence. As Oubiña affirms, this is a suffocating world with no new possibilities where the characters are trapped in a closed network (15). In fact, Oubiña points out that the film adopts a sort of “children’s perception”:

Se trata de una percepción intensa y extremadamente sensible, aun cuando sea parcial e insuficiente para decodificar lo que sucede: los planos registran las acciones desde una posición excéntrica y su decisión de resaltar o asordinar determinados componentes de la escena produce un tono levemente extrañado. (16)

[It is an intense and extremely sensitive perception, even when it is partial and insufficient to decode what happens: The shots capture actions from an eccentric position and their decision to highlight or deafen certain components from the scene produces a slightly strange tone.]

The most common technique foreshadowing the existence of the threat and also representing the “children’s perception” to which Oubiña refers, is the use of sound, more particularly, the one that emerges from the non-visible, from the off-screen. For Martel, sound represents an important device in her work. In a talk given in 2009 in the context of the “Festival de Ideas” organized by *Casamérica* in Madrid, she presents her main points regarding her artistic production, where she affirms:

Me parece que una sala de cine se parece bastante a una pileta de natación vacía en donde todos estamos metidos. Y a pesar de que no hay agua, estamos inmersos en un fluido, y ese fluido elástico es el aire que se comporta muy parecido a como se comporta el agua en la transmisión de sonido. El sonido en el cine se propaga en la sala [...] y atraviesa el cuerpo. [...] Los que somos tocados por el sonido en el cine somos los espectadores.

[I think that a screening room is very similar to an empty pool in which we all are inside. And, although there is no water, we are immersed in a fluid, and that elastic fluid is the air that behaves like water for transmitting the sound. The sound in cinema propagates itself [...] in the room and goes through the body. [...] In cinema, what is touched by the sound are the spectators.]

Martel later emphasizes in her speech the incapacity of human beings to “clos[e] their ears” as we can close our eyes. She concludes: “Sound in cinema is the inevitable.” There is no way to escape from sound. In another interview, she adds: “In cinema, the most tactile, intimate thing you have to convey is sound. The sound plunges into you; it’s very physical” (Monteagudo 74). Her conception of sound helps to explain the mode in which she constructs haptic images: Martel gives texture to the sound. She makes it an element able to evoke a presence (an invisible presence), perceivable only by its sound. At the same time, in *La Ciénaga*, the sound is not subordinated to



the visual image, which may imply an ideological conception of cinema itself and the consideration of the spectator as a sensible and embodied subject.<sup>57</sup>

What sort of invisible presence, then, is evoked by the sound, and how does that presence materialize in the story of the film? The answer may be the reference to the “African rat” represented through the several lurking dogs. During Tali’s first visit to Mecha’s house, the children hang out by the pool when Verónica tells the story of a lady who finds a dog and adopts him. The dog kills and eats all her cats, so she takes him to the veterinary doctor, who takes a machete and cuts the dog in two. The vet says that the dog was not a dog, but an African rat. From this moment, the presence of dogs and their permanent barking will remind the children, and spectators, of the dread awakened by the story. Later, in a second visit to Mecha’s house, Tali and her husband leave the children in the car. They approach the window and try to see the dogs that bark outside. They say: “It’s the African rat.” The spectator’s gaze, in this scene, remains as incomplete as the children’s. The children cannot see the dogs, and neither can the audience. However, the barking continues and continues (see Figure 45).



Figure 45: The barking dogs/The African rat.

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel Larson Guerra explains the ideological potentiality of the sound in cinematographic language: “el sonido de los medios audiovisuales, predominantemente usado de [una] manera empirista-funcional subordinada a la imagen, es una construcción ideológica que cumple su papel de coadyuvar, no a la observación crítica de la realidad, sino al mantenimiento de una visión acrítica del sistema dominante” (147) [the sound of audiovisual media, mostly used in an empirical-functional manner subordinated to the image, is an ideological construction that carries out its role of contributing, not the critical observation of reality, but the maintenance of an acritical vision of the dominant system.]

The African rat becomes the symbol of the threat that inhabits the movie, as a sort of felt and invisible presence. The sound of the barking dogs becomes the main technical element that represents the incapacity of the optical visibility to capture a sense of horror that invades the internal dimension of the bodies. This sort of threatening presence embodied in the dog/African rat remains as an evocation during the entire movie, as part of the haptic dimension of the film.

The threat does not only inhabit La Mandrágora, but also La Ciénaga (the city) and Tali's house. When she tends to her plants on the patio, the dog at the other side of the wall scares Luciano. He cannot see it, but rather hears it. The permanent barking of this dog can be heard from the beginning of the movie and provokes Luciano's curiosity: He wants to see the dog because he is convinced that it is the African rat. At the end of the movie, he uses a ladder to see what is on the other side, but he slips, falls, and dies. The barking continues; the dog is still hidden from our eyes (see Figure 46).



Figure 46: The barking dog at the other side of the wall.

The development of a sense of danger and the threatening presence located in the un-seen of the cinematographic frame in Martel's film have been read as affective and sensitive marks of the historical conditions that Argentine society experiences in a post-dictatorial era. The residues of the dictatorship, its violence, and the subsequent decadence of the Neoliberal policies during the 1990s are considered by several critics as significant events that define the feelings of the then

younger generation.<sup>58</sup> However, others criticize this position, qualifying it as an “easy” and “insufficient” “allegorical key” from which to read the film. Bongers, for example, affirms that this sort of allegorical readings tends to fail because what it seems to advocate is “a principle of uncertainty, carried out to its final consequences and provoked by the seen and listened invisibility” (“Topografías accidentales...”).

In any case, the political aspect of the film remains in its consideration of the aesthetic form as an ideological element. This can be found in the construction of haptic images (the sense of danger that remains non-visible, the reference to sounds or smells, such as the putrefaction of the swimming pool, for example) that appeal to an embodied spectator. Martel’s cinema, with its use of the sound and a camera that shows by “hiding” threatening entities, challenges the “naturalization of a perceptive experience no other than a forged training of audio-visual reading” (Martins 407, “En contra de...”, my translation). These techniques challenge the concept of visibility and allow the film to acquire a “skin.” Thus, the texture of *La Ciénaga* refers to its tactile condition (the feeling coming from the unseen, the illusion of the heard and the touchable of the images), and also, to its political implications (the idea of sound as a device that ideologically diverts from the optical viscosity of the IMR). As Bobillo points out, in this film “lo que se *siente* suceder es tan importante como lo que se *ve*” (what it is felt is as important as what is seen) (125).

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<sup>58</sup> For Joanna Page, for example, Martel’s reflexivity and minimalism are aesthetic responses to a retreat of cinema to a private sphere that signifies political implications from a public sphere. In other words, Martel’s films represent allegorically a “critical intervention, signaling the failure of a bankrupt, dysfunctional state and emphasizing the primacy of biological life in times of severe economic crisis” (193). Martins also points out the political character of *La Ciénaga* regarding the impact of past violence in the depiction of bodies: “I believe that the intent behind [Martel’s] debut film lies not only in the search to recover a past in the sense of historical clarification nor in the exploration of memory as testaments of facts, but rather in delving into the body’s memory, the memory that brings us closest to the Real, that records how violence becomes normalized and legitimized, that accounts precisely for this very state of exemption” (207). Finally, Podalsky also points out the film’s political dimension by expressing how younger characters and their feeling bodies serve as an instrument to measure social decay. She affirms that, although unmentioned, the dictatorship is evoked. According to her, “By aligning the spectator with [Momi] and her sensibility, not as a return to innocence but as a way of experiencing the affective legacies of dictatorship, *La Ciénaga* reconnects us with the murkier depths upon which today’s civil democracy floats” (111).

### **The Embodied Vision in Debora Warner's *The Last September***

The most important aspect that allows us to connect *La Ciénaga* with Warner's film *The Last September* is the depiction of optical visibility as an embodied element in cinema. Although Warner's film seems not to apply hapticity as Martel or Quintela's works do, *The Last September* develops a strong concern around the validity of the visual in cinema and the mediated condition of optical visibility. In her film Deborah Warner adapts Elizabeth Bowen's novel, following most of the story line with some considerable changes.

The film, commonly classified as a "Big House Drama" (Connolly 29), is a psychological drama set in County Cork, Ireland, in the 1920s during the Independence Wars. Richard Naylor and his wife, Lady Myra, entertain houseguests who uneasily try to enjoy themselves while the tide of Irish republicanism rises all around them. Their young niece, Lois, is a protégée of her uncle and aunt who are aware of her chances to marry a wealthy and important man. A young Captain, Gerald Colthurst, is madly in love with Lois, and during the film, he declares his intentions of marrying her and making a life with her. However, little by little, Lois discovers that she does not desire to continue her relationship with Colthurst any further, especially after she reencounters her childhood friend, Peter Connolly, who has now become a wanted Irish killer. One afternoon, Lois runs into him and discovers that he is hiding in the ruined mill on her uncle's property. She desires Peter, but circumstances always make meeting each other impossible. In the film Warner develops this love story, which is inexistent in the original novel.

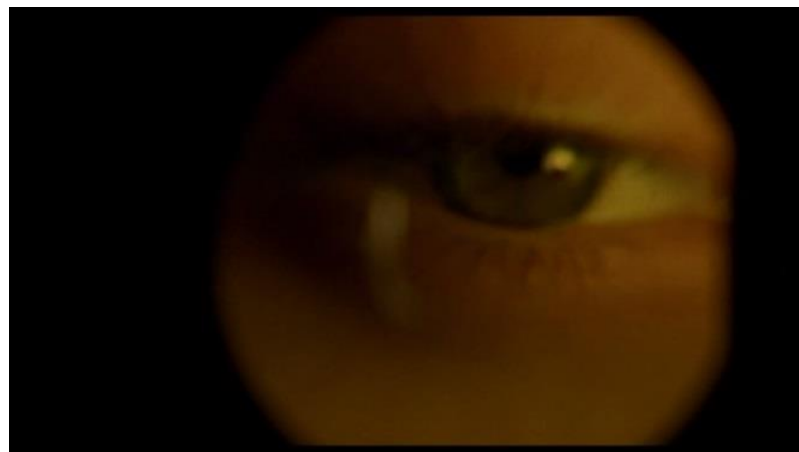
In addition, the movie presents another story line treated differently in the book. Warner develops other storylines that involve past love affairs between some of the visitors: Hugo Montmorency and Marda Norton. Hugo is married to an older woman, Francie Montmorency, the only English visitor in the house who starts to notice her distance from the others, the Anglo-Irish.

By the end of the film, Lois visits Peter again in the mill, but Captain Colthurst who is trying to arrest Peter interrupts them. Lois escapes and returns home; and Peter kills the Captain and runs away. All the visitors of the house sense that this is end of a period, of the era of the accommodated Anglo-Irish. The Montmorencys leave, and Marda needs to meet her fiancée in London and get married. However, Lois asks her to take her on the trip. Unlike the original novel where Lois goes to France to pursue her studies in art and improve her French, she joins Marda and happily leaves the house in the film. Both the literary work and the movie show the decline of the Anglo-Irish generation that predicts the victory of the Irish Republic.

From the very beginning, seeing and not-seeing are important topics in the film: Richard Naylor working with light-bulbs; blurred people seen through transparent objects such as windows, crystal balls, colored glasses, etc.; mirrors and reflections; the use of telescopes; characters spying on each other or covering windows not to be seen. The film works around the concept of visibility that may imply the ulterior conception of both the literary and the cinematographic works: The impossibility to “see”/“understand” the imminent end of the characters’ social class. Larson Guerra affirms that, in our culture, “seeing” is equivalent to “understanding,” “knowing,” “verifying,” “conceiving,” “predicting,” and “validating.” He highlights the idea that in Western societies the epistemological power of the subject is clearly given as a function of the centrality of the eye (146). In any case, the connection between the social and historical concerns in the film’s aesthetic form remains as a possible reading to interpret the motivation behind the cinematographic language. However, the central element that I present in this chapter is the alternative interaction that the film proposes in regard of optical visibility. Here, sight appears not only as a means to capture and represent stories, ideas, characters, etc. in cinema, but also as an incomplete, inaccurate, blocked perceptive sense. In fact, the different ways in which the film problematizes vision and visibility

reveal optical visibility's artificial disposition. The film also appeals to an embodied spectator able to perceive an incomplete visual reference, an artificial space that contradicts the diegetic illusion of the IMR. There is a story in *The Last September*, but the mode in which it is presented shows the limitations of understanding through the sole attention to and of the eye.

The first element that shows the centrality of sight as a concern in the film is the constant use of telescopes. By referring to Laura Mulvey's explanation of scopophilic eroticism, Franks analyzes Lois' agency in looking. He affirms: "Lois is a true scopophiliac [...] Her nearly constant companion is her spyglass, which provides her intimate looks at the objects of her interest while at the same time suggesting her distance or detachment from them" (124). Franks also highlights that Lois is not the only one that looks, but she is also looked at. Then, she becomes not only the object of the gaze (as Mulvey would say it), but also an agent in looking (see Figures 47, 48, and 49).



Figures 47, 48, and 49: Lois spying on others.

Clearly, there is a permanent use of the telescope as a sort of instrument to observe others, as inhabitants of another world. The day of the tennis match and the party at her uncle and aunt's house, Lois gets up and spies on the guests who arrive in the morning by using her telescope. The image that the camera shows imitates the one Lois perceives: A circular frame that follows people (children, guests, servants, etc.). The visual image is affected by a sort of yellow tone and moves quickly; when it intends to observe two people in the back of the field, it gets distorted and blurry. The figure of those two people remains unrecognizable

This is not the only scene in which Lois looks at others without being discovered. After Hugo and Francie arrive at the house, Lois and Laurance (her aunt's nephew) spy on the couple from the floor above. They remove some old wood from the floor, revealing a hole from which they observe Hugo and Francie talking. They laugh like children, but the moment becomes serious when Francie mentions Lois' father (who lives and travels in Africa). Furthermore, before Lois' first approaches Peter, she sees him and other members of the IRA discussing something while he hides in the old mill. All these moments emphasize Lois' agency in looking. However, during her first sexual encounter with Peter, she carries her telescope, and while she kisses him, the camera adopts the telescope's gaze. Unlike previous scenes where she saw others through this object, here Lois becomes the observed object. Since this consists of a sex scene, these shots make her a desirable object of the gaze, as Mulvey would say (see Figure 50).

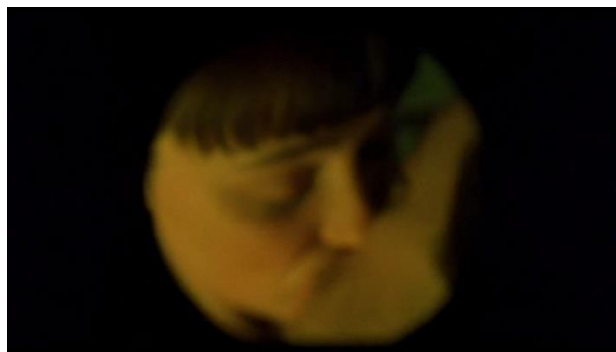


Figure 50: Lois being looked at by the telescope/camera.

The constant use of the telescope not only reflects Lois' detachment from the older generation or the whole social class to which she belongs, but also the detachment of the spectator's own gaze in cinema. By being the "bearer of the gaze" and the object of looking, Lois' scenes with the telescope traces a parallel with the condition of the spectator as a detached observer. Who looks at her and Peter through the telescope when they kiss? The intruder in this scene is the audience, which spies on the person who was so far the user of that telescope. These scenes demonstrate cinema's potential as "scopophilic art," and make the audience aware of their position as observers. Although the gaze may be presented here as an important concern for the film, which in the end would mean a reinforcement of optical visibility as central for cinema, Warner's movie goes further and questions the validity of looking and the visual image.

By filming in this way, the camera exposes its own material existence when another object disrupts a clear and "complete" perception: There is a device – the camera – that registers the image. It is possible to notice the presence of the camera because the circumstances in which it films impregnate the visual results (the position of the camera and its existence is revealed when several objects block a clear visual depiction of what is recording, for example). In scenes like these, the camera does not adopt the visual perception from any character; there are no characters in the house or at the other side of the ballroom perceiving what the camera (and the audience) sees. It is the camera itself. The visual perception, then, seems to distort the very constructed illusion in the film due to the material existence of a filming object that leaves its marks and its presence on the image.

Another way in which Warner makes the visual perception not a means to create an illusion, but rather an embodied condition is through the construction of the set. Warner, a former theater director, brings to the film a clear theatrical register in the development of the *mise-en-scène*. In



several scenes, the lighting creates a sense of “theatricality” in the scenes: When Peter and other IRA members capture some soldiers in the middle of the night, the lighting is strongly green. The sunset, represented by an artificial orange light coming from a window, creates a sense of watching filmed theater. Although one can qualify these observations as criticism of Warner’s filming skills, these scenes show a clear consciousness of not hiding the artificiality of cinema’s illusion (see Figures 51 and 52). The use of the lights concurs with other elements analyzed so far: The material



Figures 51 and 52: Objects blocking/distorting optical visibility.

and corporeal condition of the visual perception are put in the image in several ways. This is also connected to the use of the shadows throughout the film. Warner films some dialogues by surrounding the characters’ faces with some sort of “artificial” shadow. Rather than providing particular lighting that would erase the presence of shadows that make the image blurry or partial, Warner’s cinematography utilizes it to emphasize once again the incompleteness and embodiment of the camera’s visual perception (see figure 53).



Figure 53: Artificial shadows.

Finally, the last aspect of the cinematographic form that makes *The Last September* a film that reflects on its own visual limitations and corporeality is a constant use of the camera as in first person form. During the film, the camera rapidly adopts what could be an object or character's gaze (Laurance carrying a gramophone and spinning it at the beginning of the film, for example). Throughout the film, Lois' point of view is one that camera adopts more frequently. As stated before, most of the scenes with the telescope show her gaze. However, the final part of the movie presents something different. In various scenes, Lois uses a swing near the house, which could symbolize her connection with her childhood that she seems to lose little by little. By the end of the film, after deciding to move to another country and have a new life, she uses the swing for a last time and silently observes her surroundings (the house and the fields where she grew up) before finally leaving.

The following scene shows Marda and Lois saying good-bye to the rest of the family as the carriage pulls away. The camera, then, returns to the swing: There is nobody around. The wind makes the swing spin round. Later, the camera spins and spins, as it were on that swing. Although this may not qualify as a first person point of view, it clearly emphasizes an embodied presence, or perhaps, Lois' embodied absence. The camera continues spinning making the image blurry, rapid, and confusing. Here, again, the visual perception acquires a physical condition: What one sees is an embodied camera, whose optical perception remains confusing, limited, and also, at this point of the film, nostalgic. The camera registers the decline of an entire generation, its disappearance; it views from the gradual "absence" of this family represented through Lois' (departed) point of view.

The cinematographic form in *The Last September* does not try to present a story by constructing a strong diegetic illusion. Instead, the film develops in different manners a

problematic, blocked, artificial, and embodied optical visibility. There is a corporeal presence that captures and observes the image. This can be read as a stylistic and ideological quality of the film that presents an alternative to encounter cinema as a corporeal and experiential art (see Figure 54).



Figure 54: The camera spins.

### **Experiencing the Other: Carlos Quintela's *La piscina***

In 2010, Carlos Quintela presented his first feature film, *La piscina*. His debut work is an experimental movie that shows how four young students with different physical disabilities spend a summer day in the public swimming pool with their instructor. They arrive in the morning, swim, make jokes, go for lunch, and later continue swimming and playing until their parents come to pick them up. One can observe some sort of conflict: The girl, Diana, and one of the boys, Rodrigo, make jokes about another member of the group, Oscar. Also, one can see the beginning of a love triangle: Rodrigo declares to Diana his feeling for her, but she shows more concern for Oscar, with whom she also had a fight in the swimming pool. In any case, the development of this story is subtle and has no further actions. The film has almost no dialogue and no story. According to Reyes, this sort of production has become more common in contemporary Cuban cinema. Cuban

films “tend more towards the ‘how’ than ‘what’ and trust the nature of the visible to the point of leaving us with the bodies, the gestures and silences” (130).<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Quintela’s film reduces a narrative objective and places above all the development of an environment and an appeal to a connection through contemplation rather than diegetic logic. In this film, the haptic visuality becomes a useful means to construct a gaze that feels instead like one that solely looks. Thus, *La piscina* can be read as an invitation to inhabit the others’ bodies, feelings, and perception. Constantly, the still shots and long takes, the attention to physical conditions and training, to physical needs like eating or resting, and all such elements place the spectator’s gaze in the others’ corporeal world. There is also a powerful statement behind this because the film’s main characters are teenagers with particular physical and mental disabilities. In this way, the process of inhabiting the other becomes an invitation to reframe the ways in which bodies with disabilities are known. In this film, these bodies demonstrate how an intellectually and physically disabled body constructs perceptive and affective knowledge.

In order to observe the politics of the corporeal dimension of this film, it is important to consider some concepts from disability studies. One of the most important and most constant objectives in this area of study is to unveil the modes and the conditions in which the discourse of normalcy functions. According to Davis, in order to understand the disabled body, one must return to the “normal” body, to the construction of the idea of normalcy. The concept of the normal body is what created in the end the “disabled” one as the opposite. Historical and political contexts in the nineteenth century consolidated the conception of normalcy, as “part of a notion of progress,

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<sup>59</sup> In the 36th Latin American Film Festival, the Cuban film *Venecia* (2014, dir. Kiki Álvarez) was a surprise for the audience, since it simply follows three female friends navigating bars, restaurants, houses, and clubs in a single night in Havana with no further intentions to develop “spectacular” narrative plots. The movie focuses on the girls’ feelings and desires, with no deep explanations of their actions. This film can be seen as another proof of the switch that Reyes affirms.

of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie. The implications of the hegemony of normalcy are profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production” (Davis 12). Indeed, bodies are classed by a medical discourse as “disabled” if they differ from a physiological and mental construction of the “normal” human body. Hickey-Moody affirms that the medical discourse has been developed to repair and fix rather than for “thinking” about the human body (26). Goodley highlights that being normal is not only a preferred way of living in contemporary societies, but also an “ontological state and moral category”. In fact, he argues:

[D]isabled bodies (and minds) expose the ontological insecurities of the normals’ psyche, body and culture. While all bodies/minds fail to match up to the autonomous, whole, speaking subject demanded by the imaginary and symbolic aspects of neoliberal-able culture, the normal deal with such failings by finding failings in Others (119).

Indeed, it is possible to trace the connection between physical and mental disabilities as modes to represent moral or ethical “failures” in cultural works. By analyzing Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Mitchell and Snyder define what they call the “ideology of the physical.” According to them, historically the physical surface has been used as a medium that exposes more abstract and intangible landscapes of psychology, morality, and spirituality. “The bridge constructed by the ideology of the physical seeks to lure the reader/viewer into the mystery of whether discernible defects reveal the presence of an equally defective moral or civil character” (13). *La piscina* challenges this sort of traditional conception of disabilities.

The aesthetic form deployed in Quintela’s film serves to develop not only an emotional connection between the characters, but also to create an affective and corporeal connection between them and the audience. The construction of several haptic images in the film motivates a “perception” through corporeal senses of what seems to be these teenagers’ ordinary day. The texture of this film – its corporeal/political dimension – lies in the hapticity of the images that

attempt to defy two discourses of power: The cultural discourse that considers disabled bodies as evidence of a deeper “evil” (the “ideology of physical”) and the IMR’s implication of a disembodied spectator.

First, the presence of nature in Quintela’s film with the use of long shots emphasizes the role of an active and contemplating spectator. The opening image of the film is a dense mist that little by little disappears and reveals the empty swimming pool. Once the day gets brighter, the sun invades the space. Later, a large mass of dark clouds approaches with loud thunder. Suddenly, it rains while the teenagers seek refuge under a roof. The day becomes clear again and the light of the sunset by the end of the film illuminates the scene. Nature, then, is constantly present in the film; sometimes it bursts in the action; sometimes it shows a quiet environment. However, nature does not remain simply as a setting. The way in which the characters are framed within a natural environment seems to emphasize a sort of correspondence between them. These bodies are vivid elements immersed in a broader and living environment. The constant use of extreme long shots in takes of extended time motivates the viewer’s predisposition to contemplate the subjects in their ambience as elements that coexist harmoniously.

Spectators, then, experience the large presence of natural life not only from the constant sonorous reference to the wind and water, but also from the way in which the camera captures characters. At the beginning of the film, it is possible to observe a car bringing Dani, the teenager with Down’s syndrome, to the swimming pool. The car parks, he leaves the car and runs. His mother goes after him. This little drama occupies only a third of the image captured by the camera; the rest is dedicated to the sky. This sort of visual concept (general views of the characters surrounded by a larger natural context) is used in other ways in the film: The shot of the instructor preparing the pool surrounded by the mist at the beginning of the film; the students running or

swimming with the intense sun above; the characters waiting under a roof while it rains, etc. Clouds, the sun, the wind, the rain, and the sky invade the space that these characters inhabit (see Figure 55).



Figure 55: Dani, his mom, and the sky.

According to Reyes, methods like this function as another example of the process of mutation taking place in contemporary Cuban audiovisual culture. He mentions that the director's "contemplative style responds to the new 'cinephilia' of young Cuban Filmmakers" (131), which is also connected to forms of independent and low budget cinema.<sup>60</sup> He affirms:

*The Swimming Pool* behaves like a fragment, an anecdote almost, whose purpose is to support a tension of naturalistic ambition. This aspires to erase the dramatic content of its structure. Its screenwriter, Abel Arcos, resists filling the void of this universe with plot points to satisfy the desire of a spectator used to attending movies to 'see things happen.' From this perspective this work's style unfolds as a duel with the absent: the mainstream narrative cinema, even the Classical Cuban Cinema (130-131).

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<sup>60</sup> It is possible to establish a connection between this contemporary aesthetics of Cuban cinema with the movement of Imperfect Cinema from the 1970s. Referring to García Espinosa's famous text *Por un cine imperfecto*, Michael Chanan explains: "The thesis is not that technical and artistic perfection necessarily prevent a film being politically effective—that would be absurd—but that in the underdeveloped world these cannot be aims in themselves. Not only because to attempt to match the production values of the big commercial movie is a waste of resources, but also because in the commercial cinema of the metropolis these values become irredeemably superficial, the beautifully controlled surface becomes a way of lulling the audience into passive consumption. This is contrary to the needs of an authentically modern cinema that seeks to engage with its audience by imaginatively inserting itself and them into social reality, to film the world around it without makeup, to make the kind of film that remains incomplete without an actively responsive audience taking it up. This sense of incompleteness without the audience is part of what García Espinosa means by imperfection" (Cuban Cinema 305).

In fact, *La piscina* is an atypical film for Cuban cinematic production; a film that can be compared maybe to other independent movies such as *Suite Habana* (2003), *Madagascar* (1995, both directed by Fernando Pérez), or the recent production *Venecia* (2014, dir. Kiki Álvarez). What Reyes explains here is the film's purpose, which is to counteract the unembodied and "alienated" spectator developed by the IMR. The long takes and wide frames invite the spectator's gaze to be aware of its condition as "contemplator" and present subject while watching the film.

Secondly, another important aspect of Quintela's film is the hapticity of the images. As mentioned before, nature is not only an element to be observed, but also to be felt: The mist, the rain, the sky, and clouds cover almost the entire frame inviting the spectator to feel the different climates. However, the film's main interest lies in making the characters sentient subjects with whom spectators identify. Since the movie does not develop a narrative arc and does not use long dialogues or marked plot points, the attention centers in the relationship between the characters. The verbal element is extremely reduced, and the minimal conversations do not attempt to present deeper or transcendental conflicts.

The haptic images are introduced by the use of sound. Perhaps the most telling scene in this sense happens when the characters go for lunch to a small store near the swimming pool. When they arrive, there is nobody around. They get a table, and the coach buys a burger and a coke for each one. They sit together and eat. The scene lasts several minutes, and the camera observes the children eating, laughing, and drinking. There is again no dialogue. What becomes important in this scene is the dedication to the action of eating by registering carefully the sound. The camera captures their faces (most of the shots are close-ups), but mainly the sounds they make: One can hear clearly when they bite into the burger and drink their soda. This sound is also overlapped with Diana and Rodrigo's laugh. It is possible to say that the camera's attention is dedicated to record



the act of eating and tasting food; again, an invitation to connect corporeally with these characters (see Figure 56).



Figure 56: Eating, drinking, and laughing.

The attention dedicated to eating and drinking corresponds with the ulterior objective of the film, which is making the spectator interact with the characters through sensations and emotions. Rather than centering its attention on the identity of these characters through action or events, the film explores these teenagers' affective and physical sensations. The hapticity in *La piscina* is defined by momentary instances of sharing the other's corporeal feelings.

As Reyes affirms, the film develops two strong ideas, regarding not only the other's (disabled) body, but also in regard of cinema itself. As he explains:

[Quintela's work] ends up being a double discourse. About the otherness of human beings who don't belong in a scripted universe. And also about a Cinema that wants to stop being literature and filmed theater. This is a Cinema that refuses to provide explanations, that does resort to local references and indigenous cultural values, that pushes naturalism aspiring to abstraction and offers its only answer, the naked face of the time-image. (131)

This is a film, Reyes concludes, that does not only think about the spectator as a sentient subject, but also about cinema itself. This sort of interaction between the cultural work and the audience can be also compared to a study made by Hickey-Moody. By studying a dance performance by the Restless Dance Company (Australia) and using Deleuze and Guattari's

concept of the “bloc of sensations,”<sup>61</sup> Hickey-Moody explains the mode in which the artwork is able to construct an affective connection with the observer. She explains:

Bloc of sensations are monuments, entities that propel the worldviews and knowledge of those for whom they speak, and in so doing, they create a new sensory landscape for their beholder. These simultaneous acts of presenting a worldview and creating a sensory landscape occur through an artwork’s affect. This is the way a work of art can make its observer feel. (9-10)

Hickey-Moody analyzes how the dancers in this company, most of them with mental and physical disabilities, are able to express a sort of corporeal knowledge in their performance. In this way, the author criticizes the construction of the medical discourse about disabled body based on a Cartesian dualistic perspective.

In Quintela’s film, one can also observe an interest for developing a conscious and engaged conception of disabled bodies and perceptive knowledge. Rather than talking or making otherness a conflict with narrative purposes, *La piscina* explores the dimension of the other by appealing to the emotional and physical sensorium of the spectator, by developing physical and perceptive thoughts.

In this way, the film entails a critical reading of the cultural and medical discourse that contrasts the “normal” bodies from the “disabled.” Quintela’s work also presents an alternative to the IMR aesthetic conception of cinematographic language by proposing that the spectators to connect with the environment and characters through corporeal senses. Yet, above all, it invites to understand the other, to dedicate time to the other’s feelings and physical sensations, and to create a corporeal idea that serves to (re)connect us as human beings.

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<sup>61</sup> The authors explain: “Art is the language of sensations. Art does not have opinions. Art undoes the triple organisation of perceptions, affections and opinions [*doxa: the “essence” of a body*] in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensations that take the place of language... A monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that happened but confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event.” (1996: 176-77, author’s square parentheses)

## The Corporeal Shot

In an interview given to David Oubiña, Lucrecia Martel presents what seems to summarize the formal style and the conceptual motivation in the three films analyzed in this chapter. She asserts:

El cuerpo es una geografía de una soledad absoluta. Uno está en un lugar donde nadie más puede estar. Es imposible que alguien se ponga en el lugar de uno. Pero existen estos pequeños trucos que hemos inventado y que, por unos instantes, de manera imperfecta, logran poner al otro en el cuerpo de uno. Permiten compartir lo imposible, permiten salvar esa soledad a la que uno está condenado de principio a fin. El cine reproduce de alguna manera la percepción de lo que tenemos afuera del cuerpo y el otro, por un tiempito, va a poder estar el lugar del cuerpo de uno. (68)

[The body is a geography of an absolute solitude. One is in a place where nobody else can be. It is impossible for anyone else to put him or herself in the place of oneself. But these little tricks that we have invented exist and that, for a few instants, in an imperfect manner, succeed in putting the other in the body of oneself. They allow the impossible; they allow to overcome the solitude to which one is damned from beginning to end. Cinema reproduces in some way the perception of what we have outside of the body and the other, for a little bit, can be in the place of one's body.]

By appealing to a haptic gaze and by making the optical visibility an incomplete or blocked perception, Martel, Warner, and Quintela create a feeling and embodied subject on the other side of the screen. The corporeal and political dimension (i.e. the texture) of these films consists in the way they construct haptic images and/or the conception of an inaccurate, incomplete, confusing optical perception. In a way, they construct a corporeal conception of cinematic language that presents a different sort of interaction to the IMR. Corporeality in cinema seems to become a possible way to “liberate” viewers and create “critical spectators”, as Comolli would say. Thus, the texture of these films appears in the “corporeal shots” that ultimately reveal a conception of cinema as an embodied experience.

In the case of *La Ciénaga*, the particular use of the sound and framing develops a growing sense of threat during the film. Martel's haptic images materialize a sense of danger, an ominous

entity that approaches. It also makes the presence of past tension between the characters present. The film configures the body and its senses as active means to feel/understand the continuous decay of the families.

In *The Last September*, Deborah Warner develops a visual perception that reveals above all its own limitations and artificiality in cinema. The use of certain camera positions, objects that obstruct vision, the reference of first-person points of view, or rapid movements that distort images, all build a sense of incompleteness regarding optical visibility. The film exposes its own crafting, which makes the spectator aware of his/her own corporeal existence.

Finally, in *La piscina*, Quintela appeals to corporeality by suppressing all narrative elements almost completely: There almost are neither conflicts nor dialogues in the film. The attention is mainly focused on the ways that the film portrays a regular day in the lives of the main characters, and highlights their feelings and sensations during that day. The film focuses on the presence of the weather (wind, rain, mist) and on the characters' emotions and physical sensations. In this way, Quintela's work creates a strong corporeal connection between the spectators and the characters. Martel and Warner's productions as well as this film appeal to the audience's corporeality. Again, as Martel states in her interview, what seems to unify the cinematographic and political conception for the three filmmakers is their aim to develop a corporeal image that invites one to inhabit the other's body.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this dissertation, I pose central questions that have directed this research: How can an artwork convey a political statement through its corporeal dimension? In addition, how do artworks deal with the potentiality of bodies and sensations as political devices and the materiality of their artistic expression; more particularly, in contemporary cinema and literature from Argentina, Cuba, and Ireland? Certainly, it is impossible to find a unique and unifying answer that can respond to these questions. The representations of bodies and corporeal sensations are diverse, ever changing, and highly connected to their own historical, cultural, and political contexts. Moreover, unveiling the corporeal dimension in artistic works presents several difficulties because – as Scarry explains – it is not possible to represent the internal dimension of the body through any sort of language. Thus, these are the challenges confronted in this research: How to study the political implications of various forms of corporeality comparatively? How to address the presence of the corporeal in the cultural text clearly, if – up to a certain point – the body will always remain as an ungraspable dimension?

These challenges require a concept that functions in the liminality between the textual and the corporeal. This is how “texture,” introduced by Renu Bora and Eve Sedgwick, becomes a capital notion for this research. However, texture does not appear to be a formula, a rhetorical device, or a literary trope in Sedgwick and Bora’s understanding. For Sedgwick, more specifically who was concerned with the uninventiveness of cultural research, texture – as well as affect – opens the possibility to study a dimension not previously considered. In other words, instead of focusing on how one “understands” the configuration and impact of a certain artistic work, research should focus on how one “feels” and “perceives” such a work of art. The epistemological-phenomenological proposal is what she calls thinking “beside.” This ultimately allows cultural

investigation to break with dualistic thinking and the “critical paranoia” that have made current criticism sink into a constant and uninventive repetition.

Feeling/touching the texture of an artwork becomes an exciting idea. But, how then can the critic approach it? What opportunities does this dimension provide, and what limitations and challenges entail? The notion of texture – physical perception and corporeal sensations – seems to embrace the concerns that have motivated this dissertation. But again, how to explore this dimension, considering several challenges: The diversity of historical circumstances, artistic languages, and cultural implications. Although each artwork’s analysis considers the contextual conditions in which it has been produced on different levels, this does not become the strategy for comparison. In order to observe the political implications of bodily sensations and corporeal representations in literary and cinematic works specifically, the analysis of the artworks is centered in the various forms in which the body appears represented. Despite the differences and changing scenarios, each chapter presents a common concern that reunites similar corporeal depictions. This is the mode in which the dissertation has been organized.

In Chapter 1, the configurations of the sick body in two novels (Colm Tóibín’s *The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship*) and two films (*Los labios* and *La pared de las palabras*) present strong similarities. The dying, sick body appears as a representation in motion, inevitably moving toward its disappearance. This configuration displays a particular signifying quality: While dying, the sick body provides meanings. The intimate and individual dimension of the sick body establishes a parallel reference to a broader social framework in these novels and films. The decay of the bodies implies and endures the gradual decline of a certain social sphere or mindset, due to a deep transformation in its economic or political structures. Whether it refers to neoliberal policies applied in Argentina in the 1990s, the decline of a traditional morality and

the entrance of a more cosmopolitan mentality in Ireland, or the perception of a younger generation already unattached to revolutionary ideals in contemporary Cuba, the sick body represents the decay and transformation of an entire social sphere.

For example, the bodies dying of AIDS in Tóibín's novels carry the burden of a deep change in the social structures to which they refer: The Argentina of the 1980s in *The Story of the Night* and the Ireland of the 1990s in *The Blackwater Lightship*. In Santiago Loza and Iván Fund's film *Los labios*, the camera portrays the decay of bodies in a small town by using constant close-ups. It also makes the main characters, the three female medical workers that visit the town, to feel sick and to embody the unhealthy state that the community experiences. Also, in Fernando Pérez's *La pared de las palabras*, Luis' dying body seems to refer to multiple communal sufferings: On one hand, his family's emotional disconnection; on the other hand, the entire younger Cuban generation that "feels" the loss of hope and trust for the Revolution's ideals. Pérez's films constantly evoke an ambivalent conception regarding the political circumstances in contemporary Cuba. In this film, the decaying body echoes a deep disenchantment with the political conditions and social perception of its future. Thus, the configuration of a dying sick corporeality can be framed as an "organic allegory," a mode to make perceivable and understandable the constant and gradual communal decline. Moreover, the reference to ruins as a cultural trope appears as a constant in these artworks. The decay of the bodies seems to encounter a parallel representation in ruins: Buildings that end up destroyed, forgotten, and reduced to their weak structures appear as visual metaphors that depict once again not only the inevitable decay of bodies, but of an entire social system. This is the artworks' texture: The social decay that becomes politically perceivable through the configuration of illness and dying bodies.

In Chapter 2, the dimension of texture is framed differently. In the three works analyzed (Peter Sheridan's film *Borstal Boy*, Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography *Antes que anochezca*, and Marco Berger's film *Plan B*), homoerotic desire and the aroused body become the means through which to make a strong political statement: There are no boundaries imposed by any discourse of power that cannot be overcome by desire. Sexual attraction breaks any sort of imposition enforced by social norms. Heteronormativity cannot constrain the strength of corporeal desire. More specifically in these artworks, homosexual desire serves to contest not only a patriarchal and heteronormative discourse, but also other forms of social categorization, separation, or discrimination.

In *Borstal Boy*, for example, homosexual desire functions as a mode to connect an Irish IRA activist with a British sailor. The nationalistic and patriarchal mentality that once separated them is challenged by a strong homoerotic desire. In *Antes que anochezca*, Arenas uses homosexual attraction and sexual encounters to attack the *machista* mentality that motivates several discriminatory and oppressive policies by the State. In *Plan B*, Berger uses the framing, camera's positions, and timing to represent a growing sexual tension between two self-defined heterosexual men. In this way, Berger's film makes perceivable the idea of desire as something that goes beyond any sexual categorization imposed by the heteronormative discourse. The texture to which these artworks appeal is the desire that makes understandable and felt in the flesh the following political statement: No discourse or set of social norms can impose a control over the object to which a body is attracted. In this way, desire and the aroused body become strong political tools to overcome such discursive administration.

In Chapter 3, the analyzed artworks represent a strong political statement through pain and torture. These films and the short story make texture the mode to return to and re-think historical



social wounds: The pain caused by certain political agendas is still endured by society and requires some sort of relief. These artworks become the means to portray the liminality of pain, as Javier Moscoso presents it: Cultural representations of pain demonstrate that societies conceive it in a way similar to a dynamic structure. When pain is inflicted, the body enters a liminal space, because while wounds are open and suffering is felt, reparation is demanded. The mode in which these artworks capture such reparation is by making a particular statement: Such suffering, torture, and pain have been inflicted by State Apparatuses in order to manage and administer the social body. Despite their differences, all of the analyzed works present pain and the wounded body as an ambivalent corporeal representation. Here the body is the surface of inscription for State violence, but also the most effective discursive/sentient weapon to expose and attack the institutions that perpetrate violence as mechanisms of control and discipline.

In Néstor Perlongher's short story "El informe Grossman," the multiple narrators present tortured and wounded bodies in a fictional scenario during the Falkland Islands War in 1982. The Army disciplines these bodies with excessive violence, but they also represent the mode to counteract the authority and power of this apparatus. Perlongher makes these suffering bodies participants in homosexual encounters. While suffering, they enjoy the sexual pleasure of torture. In this way, Perlongher makes pain a part of a homosexual activity that disrupts the patriarchal authority of the Army. Paula Markovitch's film *El premio* tells the story of a young girl who hides from the dictatorial government in the 1970s. Despite these circumstances, she returns to school, where she gradually encounters an oppressive environment. The representation of the School as a State Apparatus and its mode to administer and discipline children through physical suffering makes the corporeal dimension of the film an important political statement. What this young girl and other children suffer equates in this micro-world to what is going on in the broader social

framework. In Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters*, the Church, the State, and the Family are represented as the apparatuses that control bodies and implement their ideological conceptions through violence. The film shows all forms of violent control inflicted by these apparatuses, making pain and physical suffering means to expose and attack the State's policies and society's mentality in Ireland during the 1950s. In Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *La última cena*, the religious discourse in complicity with capitalist exploitation use pain and torture to reinforce their control over black slaves. Gutiérrez Alea's look into the past reveals and reinforces the historical role of Afro-Cubans in the development of a revolution. Once again, pain becomes a corporeal means to disrupt the past's violent manipulation of State Apparatuses over bodies. The dimension of texture in these works is highly tied to their historical references, but their sentient quality remains as a present condition. In this way, pain and the wounded body becomes a tool of political statements.

Finally, in Chapter 4, the dimension of texture appears closely related to the aesthetic form of the films analyzed. Here, no historical connections are traced in order to compare these films. Instead, the conceptions that define their cinematographic form arise as their strong political implications. The three films analyzed make the spectator's corporeality put into practice. Thus, these films present an alternative to discursive configuration that shapes production and spectatorship in cinema: The so-called Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR). These films make viewing a more holistic act that involves the whole body. In this way, the three films materialized through their appeal to physical sensations an ephemeral connection between the Self and the Other.

In Lucrecia Martel's *La Ciénaga*, for example, the constant reference to an off-screen entity through sound develops a sense of threat and danger in spectators. This cannot be visibly perceived, but rather is felt through a construction of other senses: Touch (the humidity of summer

and rains); hearing (the barking dogs that seem to be like an African rat/monster); and smell (the flies that make perceivable the decomposition and bad odor of rooms, food, animals, and a dirty pool). Since optical perception seems to be inaccurate, other physical sensations appear as modes to understand and perceive the gradual decay of this particular social group. For Deborah Warner's *The Last September*, vision and visibility also become incomplete or blocked means of perception. The film makes optical visibility problematic in several ways (objects that block or distort the camera's perception and a changing point of view, for example). This exposes, above all, the artificiality of the visual construction and the materiality of the camera as a device that captures pieces of "reality." Thus, the IMR and its conception of a clean, accurate, and clear optical construction do not define completely the formal constitution of the film. Finally, Carlos Quintela's film *La piscina* creates several haptic images that imply a spectator aware of his or her own corporeality. In fact, this seems to encapsulate the politics of the film due to its almost absent narrative plot and the fact that all main characters have some sort of disability. In this way, Quintela's work attempts to create a connection between the audience's corporeal dimensions with the one of the characters through cinematic language. This does not only present an alternative interaction with the formal configuration of the IMR, but also invites spectators to inhabit the Other's own corporeality. In these films, then, the political implications of texture do not directly refer to historical circumstances, but to the aesthetic conceptions that have determined their formal organization.

Certainly, this dissertation has shown the diverse and flexible political dimension that inhabits corporeality in literary and cinematographic works. It is possible to affirm that there is no one single and unique way to analyze and observe the body's dynamic, changing, and infinite forms that appear politically engaged in artworks. But this research proves that the risk of

observing the interstitial space between what the body can tell and what the text can grasp exposes the use of the body as a political device despite cultural, historical, or geographical differences. There are common structures that shape the conceptualizations of our embodied existence and its possibilities as discursive devices.

In a way, the body, its corporeal sensations, and its limitations become the ultimate tools to make ideas more real, more direct, and more effective. Our humanity is defined as much by our intellectual capacity as by the configuration of our body. All of these artworks appeal to the body and its sensations because there is a mode of understanding that inherently and definitely lies in our own corporeality. We understand through the body. We feel through ideas. This research has given me the certainty (and the hope) that, although several mechanisms attempt to control and manipulate our bodies in order to make them function in certain ways, there will always be an artistic expression able to suspect that our carnal existence is more than a recipient of humanity. That it is humanity itself. That is its most powerful weapon and its most fragile connection with others and the world.

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