

Violences and Broken Families: Mexican Cinema travelling to Cannes

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Abstract

This study aims to illustrate how Mexican arthouse cinema has attained institutional validation at the Cannes Film Festival, particularly within the Un Certain Regard section, through the recurrent selection of films whose thematic structures articulate an a posteriori exploration of the rupture of the nuclear family. Through the use of narratology and temathical analysis, I will provide how convergent patterns can be identified, including the thematic recurrence of human agents acting against other humans, the instrumentalization of violence as a mechanism of transition, the structural absence or non protection from the State, and the erosion of the nuclear family unit or its inability to maintain cohesion.

Keywords: Mexican Cinema, Violences, Film Festivals

Introduction

Derived from my doctoral dissertation, this paper presents part of the findings of my research. I selected Mexican films that were chosen to compete in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival (hereafter, Cannes) in order to identify a tendency toward certain types of films. This tendency emerged through a narrative and thematic analysis, complemented by an examination of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and dénouement. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus exclusively on the findings derived from the narrative and thematic analysis.

I analyzed the following Mexican films selected to compete in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival during the first two decades of the twenty-first century: *Such Is Life* (2000) by Arturo Ripstein, *Blood* by Amat Escalante (2005), *The Violin* (2006) by Francisco Vargas, *The Bastards* (2008) by Amat Escalante, *Miss Bala* (2011) by Gerardo Naranjo, *After Lucia* by Michel Franco (2012), *The Golden Cage* (2013) by Diego Quemada-Díez, *The Chosen Ones* by David Pablos (2015), *April's Daughter* by Franco (2017), and *Prayers for the Stolen* by Tatiana Huezo (2021). It is important to note that the original corpus of the dissertation did not include *Prayers for the Stolen*. However, I decided to incorporate the film due to its relevance within the Un Certain Regard section and because it suggests a possible continuity in the recurring elements identified throughout my analysis.¹ Once these films had been analyzed and their thematic and narrative recurrences identified, I was able to determine, a posteriori, the criteria of eligibility for Mexican arthouse and festival films seeking artistic validation at the Cannes Film Festival. Such validation is particularly significant, as Cannes requires that films presented in its official selections receive their

world premiere at the festival, with the exception of screenings in their country of origin (Cannes, 2026).

To address this issue, I drew on scholarship on narrative and thematic analysis (Bal, 1990; Pimentel, 1993; Bordwell and Thompson, 2016), as well as on Film Festival Studies (De Valck, 2007; Loist, 2009; Iordanova, 2013; Elsaesser on Iordanova, 2013; Wong, 2011), in order to examine narrative devices, thematic convergences, and the ways in which film festivals attribute value to these works and render them eligible for competition.

Development

As I've mentioned earlier, I've excluded from this paper the findings of the formal and cinematographic analysis, such as mise-en-scene, cinematography and montage, as well as the use of non professional actors within these films. I must, however, note that all of the ten films from the corpus featured or combined non professional actors, as well as a naturalistic mise-en-scene. Also, the events unfold within a present-day settings (here and now); hence, futuristic or period pieces are excluded. In addition to this, I consider important to note that the evolution of the mise-en-scene within this corpus (Bordwell and Thompson, 2016) can be identified in all of the main characters. All of them have transformed, somehow, throughout the fabula and, therefore, they're not the same by the end of each story. For this, I'm including a brief breakdown of the transformation for each main character. This allows us to understand the narrative recurrences of these films.

In *Thus is life*, the story begins with Julia facing the recent abandonment of her husband and finishes the story by killing his own children and leaving the communal housing complex in which she and her family used to live. In *Blood*, Diego is shown lying on the floor with blood on her head and the story finishes with him turning on the engine of his car and leaving a waste site, after disposing the body of her late daughter inside a garbage bag. In *The violin*, Don Plutarco's story begins by cleaning his violin, but the story ends with him staring at the floor, defeated, hopeless and must likely waiting to be executed. At the beginning of *After Lucia*, Alejandra is sitting on a rock, contemplating the sea and at the end she's back at the sea, without her father and marked by the violence inflicted on her. In *The bastards*, Fausto's (and Jesús) story begins with them both walking by the Los Angeles River and ends with Fausto alone, working in a field, staring at the ground, crying. In *The chosen ones*, the movie opens with Sofía staring at her boyfriend Ulises before trying to have sex with him and her story ends after she has been completely subdued to Ulises' family, has been sexually exploited by them, crying, hopeless sitting amongst them. *Miss Bala*'s story begins with Laura

in her bedroom, changing clothes and ends with her after being violated and degraded, left to herself in the middle of the street and with her trousers stained as she has lost control of her bowels. The story of *The golden cage* begins with Juan walking angrily through his low-income neighbourhood, staring at the floor and ends with Juan alone having lost his friends, staring at the sky and snow falling on him. *April's daughter*'s story begins with Valeria coming out of her bedroom naked after having sex with her boyfriend and ends with Valeria running away, riding inside a taxi carrying her baby, running away from her own mother. Finally, within *Prayers for the stolen*, Ana is shown at first on a flashback, when she and her mother are caving a hole on the ground and she commands her to hide. The film ends with Ana and one of her originally two female friends being displaced, along with Ana's mother and other habitants. She closes her eyes and hums.

Narrative recurrences

All ten films present a lineal story, with very few flashbacks and no flashforwards. Four films share a single narrative structure and six present plots and subplots. There are six films with coral protagonists and four with individual protagonists. All of these stories end with only one character, excepting *Prayers for the stolen*, which ends in a choral mode. Therefore, we've found conventions of mainstream cinema that, like Bordwell and Thompson mention (2016), don't allow stories to be shown incomplete, due the need of the cause-effect within the stories. There were no episodic or antologies structures, nor stories commencing *ad extremum* or with a different secuencization than the Aristotelic begginging, development and end (1-2-3).

Another recurrence found is that none of the films show a character at the end of the story who has been capable of coming back to the ordinary life they've either forcibly abandoned or being pulled from. They shall not change in a benefic way. Their condition will remain unchanged or worsen. Nihilism and a uncertain future traverse all of the ten analyzed films. They all have a dramatic resolution, without hope or barely with a seed of hope of what may come. Only two films coinciden in a consumed vengeance: *Thus is life* and *After Lucia*. Nevertheless, vengeance in *Thus is life* implies the complete destruction of her own family (and, possibly, of herself) and *After Lucia* it is not the protagonist who commits vengeance but her father. With the exception of *The violin* and *April's daughter*, the main characters are not capable of facing directly her antagonists. Much less of defeating them.

Curiously, a metastory has been intertwining since the implosion of Julia and the anihilation of her family (*Thus is life*, 2000), ending with the liberation of the daughter and the defeat of the mother figure in *April's daughter* (2017). At the beginning of the XXI century, a mother had murdered her children. At the end of the first two decades, a young mother was able to runaway from her own mother. This apparently inaction from the protagonists facing the oponents are explained by Wong (2011): "Psychological motivations that help to

explain series of events in classic narrative films are simply absent in many festival films" (p. 79).

This helps us complete the overall framework presented in these films and suggests a possible recurring trait, though not necessarily a *sine qua non*: protagonists are unable to defeat their antagonists and instead either resign themselves, enter a state of reduced agency, or are forced into displacement. Similarly, direct causality appears to be avoided, which I consider an identifiable feature within the corpus. Furthermore, direct causality is avoided, this becoming an identifiable trait within the corpus: the lack of explicitness and verbalization regarding the characters' motives. In sum, within the stories in our corpus, the socioeconomically impoverished class or those without possibilities for advancement have no way of obtaining justice, whereas the upper or privileged class (*After Lucia* and *April's daughter*) do obtain justice or a form of revenge and/or manage to overcome or avoid the oppressor. In the rest of the stories, the oppressive apparatuses of the State remain unscathed, and its praxis will continue to subject these people to that status quo.

Themes and violences

In *After Lucia*, family grieve is aborbed, as well as bullying in school, sexual violence, violence in different enviroments and human communication problems. *The Violin* explores the violation of human rights, marginality, misery, armed and gun-driven repression, lack of democracy and legality, lack of social justice, as well as poverty. In *The golden cage*, main themes are migration, tension between the indigenous and the mixed heritage, nationalities, latin-america- race, discrimination and racism, demystification of the american dream, colonization, social division and the cruelty of the economical system. *The chosen ones* explore sexual exploitation, human traffickin, cruel and violent family relations, mother-daughter relations, adaptation to violence, gender roles and feminine cosification. In *April's daughter*, it is reflected on adolesceses pregnancy, mother-daughter violent relations, oppresive motherhood, lack of rights in teenagehood, social expectations imposed on women and in-family betrayal. *The bastards* analyzes migration, precarious life of migrants in the USA, abandonment of the nuclear family, racism and the loss of desiring stability. *Blood* discusses Daily passivity, the influence of soap operas, teenage anguish, jealousy and fear of life, jealousy and pathological possessiveness. In *Miss Bala*, the movie examines citizenship, criminal violence, drug trafficking, narcoculture, and feelings of absurdity and meaninglessness. Finally, *Thus is life* depicts domestic violence, violent patriarchy, economic violence, structural machismo, and the dismantling of the traditional family ideal.

In addition to the way the protagonists' stories conclude and the narrative structure of the films, there is another identifiable feature behind the selection of Mexican films for Cannes' Un Certain Regard section. As Pimentel (1993, 16) mentions, "...theme,

understood as the subject or matter of discourse, guides a possible selection of incidents or details that allow for its development..." Un Certain Regard has selected Mexican dramas, which can be contrasted with films from other genres competing in the same section during those same years, such as dark comedies. The eligibility of films in which the actions, relationships, and interactions among characters are subordinated to loss and possible recovery is intertwined with the major thematic axis that guides these nine examples: violence. I have found that every film contains some form of violence, and its systematization is inevitable within each of their diegeses, in addition to serving as a starting point or turning point for each narrative. All the characters must suffer some form of violence, begin the story already immersed in it, or become consumed by it. By the end of the narratives, the violence will cease, but the characters will have undergone traumatic transformations.

The narrative of *The violin* is born within an already established systematization of violence, as the army oppresses rural Indigenous inhabitants and, above all, guerrilla fighters. In *Blood*, violence against Diego is subtly exercised by his wife, who refuses to allow his daughter to become part of the family. In *Thus is life*, the symbolic dictator of the neighborhood, La Marrana (Spanish for female pig), exerts systemic and patriarchal violence over Julia, while Nicolás inflicts emotional and psychological violence upon her; Julia, in turn, responds with physical violence directed at her children. In *After Lucia*, the physical and psychological violence inflicted by the pack (high school students) upon Alejandra becomes systemic throughout the narrative, escalating exponentially until it culminates in rape. In *April's daughter*, similarly, the violence exercised by the mother against her daughters — and particularly against the protagonist, Valeria — grows exponentially until the abduction of Valeria's baby daughter. In *The gold cage*, both the country and the Mexican state exercise systemic violence against the young Guatemalans attempting to cross Mexico in order to reach the border.

In *The bastards*, there is initially an off-screen violence, as the protagonists Jesús and Fausto are hired to intimidate a woman; however, they themselves become victims of violence at the hands of Americans and later carry out violence as part of a mission against Karen, ultimately ending her life. In *The chosen ones*, the protagonist Sofía is seduced, deceived, and abducted into a system of violence, forced into prostitution and beaten by her captors. Finally, in *Miss Bala*, Laura is extorted and forced to become part of the violent system of drug trafficking (smuggling, shootouts, murders, terrorism) and is expelled from it once her mission is completed. These are not necessarily forms of violence that contribute to the production of wealth, except in *Miss Bala*, *The bastards* and *The golden cage*, films in which the relationship with — or presence of — the United States is fundamental to the functioning of the diegesis and to the actions derived from our socioeconomic relationship with that country.

Thus, I have found that violence serves as an element in the construction of discourse and is inseparable from the main themes of the films in this corpus. Mexican (or Latin American) society is forced to combat the violence inflicted upon it, though it does not always escape it or come out on top. Consequently, many of the characters in these films become subservient to the oppressive system, for as Sánchez Vázquez (2023, 89) notes: "Violence contributes to maintaining servitude; external—not internal—submission is the result of the real, effective correlation of forces between the oppressors and the oppressed in favor of the former."

It is clear that the characters in *The Violin* are the most rebellious and that, from beginning to end, they fight against the oppressor and resist servitude. In the end, it is implied that they have not survived, and children (Don Plutarco's grandchildren) represent both the possible hope and the consequence of the story's tragic outcome. In *Blood*, the protagonist Diego reaches such a level of servitude and obedience to the oppressor (his wife) that he decides to implode and dispose of his daughter in a waste site, whom has committed suicide because she did not receive her father's attention. Julia, from *Thus is life*, becomes servile and begs to do anything to safeguard her inheritance and her place in the family, but in desperation and seeing no way out, she rebels, inflicting pain on herself and killing her own children. Alejandra, from *After Lucia*, becomes docile and servile, careful not to upset her father, who is mourning the loss of his wife. Alejandra ends up fleeing, completely severing ties with her family and the violent system. In contrast, Valeria in *April's daughter* is constantly rebellious towards her mother, never servile from start to finish, although her sister is completely subservient to the oppressive figure.

In *The Golden Cage*, the migrant children (Juan, Chauk, and Sara) are neither servile nor docile, even though they are abused, abducted, and murdered along the way. In the end, only Juan survives, but paradoxically, he becomes a servant of the U.S. economic system and ends up working in a factory. Also in relation to the United States, Fausto and Jesús from *The bastards* are subservient, though their obedience involves inflicting violence upon that very system. One of them dies, and the other ends up, just as in *The Golden Cage* serving the U.S. economic system, though working in a field. In contrast, both the protagonist Sofía from *The chosen ones* and Laura from *Miss Bala* become completely subservient to their oppressors; however, their servitude is entirely justified, as their families have been threatened and they must obey in order to safeguard their loved ones.

We have therefore found the instrumentalization of power in all the films, recalling Hannah Arendt (1970, 42): "The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All. And the latter is never possible without instruments." The notion of unity (one against all) is slightly nuanced, though not entirely absent, in two films. The first is *The Violin*, as Don Plutarco is an extension of the guerrilla movement (his son is a guerrilla leader)... just as in *Prayers for the*

Stolen, where the group of women functions as a unit, represented by Ana and her female friends.

We have found that the characters who wield power represent various types of antagonism: The classification of the antagonists in our film texts reveals such a wide variety that it is not yet possible to identify a consistent pattern regarding who holds power. We could group the antagonists into two broad categories: man vs. society (*The Violin*, *Miss Bala*, *The Bastards*, *After Lucia*, *The Golden Cage*) and human vs. human (*Thus Is Life*, *April's Daughter*, *The Chosen Ones*). A third possibility exists: man vs. himself (*Blood*). It is clear that the protagonists of this corpus do not face supernatural forces, technology, or reality. They do not have to overcome a struggle against nature or against God. They are characters who live in the here and now.

In *The Violin*, the agents wielding power are the military, who represent the state as the primary antagonist. In *Blood*, power lies with the wife, while marriage and family function as the antagonistic structures. Meanwhile, in *Thus Is Life*, La Marrana's character, as a landowner, and Nicolás, the husband, wield power within a narrative marked by patriarchy. In *After Lucia*, high school classmates hold the power, symbolizing society, peers, and youth as antagonistic forces. In *April's Daughter*, April's mother and Mateo's father embody power, representing parents and the family as antagonists.

In *The Golden Cage*, power is wielded by the state, organized crime, and the Minutemen, who represent the state, criminal organizations, and a rebellious civil society. Similarly, in *Miss Bala*, organized crime and a corrupt state hold concentrated power, painting a picture of a failed state linked to criminal organizations. In *The Bastards*, U.S. citizens and migrants appear as the actors who wield power, representing society at large. Finally, in *The Chosen Ones*, organized crime and the family itself are the dominant forces, symbolizing both criminal organizations and a new family structure.

Foucault (1988, 14) notes that "...what defines a power relationship is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately upon others, but rather acts upon their actions: an action upon action, upon potential or actual actions, present or future." In short, in these stories there are two ways in which the characters relate to the State. When the State is present in the diegesis, it can be solely oppressive, violent, and corrupt. With the exception of *April's Daughter* and *After Lucia*, where the State acts merely as a facilitator and provides the necessary bureaucracy for the character to evade it. In *Thus Is Life*, *The Chosen Ones*, *The Bastards*, and *Blood*, the State does not appear in the diegesis or is not part of the conflict. In *The Violin*, *Miss Bala*, *The Golden Cage*, and *Prayers for the Stolen*, the State has been corrupted and is oppressive and violent.

Conclusions

The exposition of broken families, in addition to families which are moving from nuclear to individuals, it is representative of the evolution of the family notion,

which is symptomatic of the convergence of the stories I've analyzed. Another recurrence found is that the main characters represent minorities or women (infancies, migrants, rural communities), which is, from a heteropatriarcal perspective, groups or entities with no agency or low possibilities of action.

A recurring theme in the narratives of these ten films is the constant struggle and conflict between human beings who subjugate other human beings. If these films have sought to address themes in which human beings are subjugated, attacked, and violated, it is because there is a prevailing need to represent this reality through a meta-narrative that runs across all ten cinematic works: the individual lacking a social structure capable of protecting or defending them. The characters who face adverse conditions in these films lack the necessary "tools" to do so.

Furthermore, we have come to understand that, beginning with the selection of the titles of the films analyzed, a semantization of their underlying issues was already foreshadowed, insofar as the titles become precursors to their narratives. *Thus is life* already announces to the viewer a resignation to misery; *Blood*, the off-screen consequence of a father's abandonment of his daughter; *The violin*, a symbol and motive for living that encapsulates the struggle and legacy of the guerrilla fighters; *The bastards*, the absence of paternal recognition; *Miss Bala*, the beauty pageant subordinated to armed violence. *After Lucia*, the consequences of the breakdown of the family following the mother's death. *The golden cage*, the paradox of wealth predicated upon slavery. *The chosen ones*, the condition of destiny and the humiliation and abuse inseparable from it. *April's daughter*, the daughters of a violent mother whose actions drive them to flee. In *Prayers for the stolen*, finally, even the moment of rest is constructed through a destructive element. In addition to the foregoing, I contend that the expectations placed upon Mexican films aspiring to be selected for Un Certain Regard are conditioned by the thematic content of their narratives.

The topics addressed in this corpus are always permeated or traversed by violence. In these films, the subjugation of the characters is a constant. We were also able to identify this through comparison with other Latin American films from the same section and years. Other exclusionary features of these films include the absence of representations of historical periods (period cinema) and the lack of use of genres such as fantasy, horror, thriller, or science fiction. In contrast, we discovered that a striking element of inclusion is that all of the stories unfold in the here and now. These are films in which the present is indispensable to the narrative itself. Thus, as a cinematic characteristic, we found to be symbiotic a cultural trait of Mexico: the inability to dream of the future and the rapid forgetting of the past.

As discussed above, for the eligibility of the Mexican arthouse cinema's narratives in Un Certain Regard, economic conditions were fundamental to understanding the crisis experienced by the characters, a crisis that invariably culminates in suffering and in two possible forms of resolution: first, resignation

to the state of affairs that generates and engulfs the characters in its violence; second, rebellion, which necessarily results in the rupture of the family unit. There is a convergence that transforms the corpus into a metanarrative of the mother-family relationship in films spanning the first two decades of the twenty-first century. As mentioned before, the first film of this corpus, Arturo Ripstein's *Thus is life* (2001) concluded with Julia murdering her own children and her running away, vanishing into the streets of Mexico City. The last film of the first two decades, Michel Franco's *April's daughter*, ends with Valeria taking her own daughter, saving her and herself from her own mother (April) and hoping into a cab, running from the possibility of creating a new family with her boyfriend and denying a nuclear family. Tatiana Huezo's *Prayers for the stolen*, a movie which inaugurates the third decade of this century, finishes the fabula with two of the three original female friends and her collapsing nuclear (already fragmented) family and the whole community forced to be recolated.

Accordingly, after reviewing the dramatic resolutions of all films, it has been relevant to identify a consistent pattern in the stories which was transformed in a narrative pattern, which is the failure, omission, rupture or denial of the family institution. I could find that it is not only an aesthetic trait or a thematical axis (except for the violence perpetrated) what I could distinguish, but the sum of these traits. Hence, I was able to establish specific traits of the Mexican festival film/Mexican arthouse film. In other words: it was not important for the festival who was the director but the film to be Mexican and to contain these recurrences.

Therefore, it is important to recall that, within the praxis of Cannes (meaning, attendance to the festival), the films competing for the main sections, which are Official Selection and Un certain regard, are not open for the public. Hence, Cannes, within its official sections, it is a festival whose main objective is not public or general audiences, but the relation of the film industry within itself, for the parallel sections are announced as sections with public access.

Mexican filmmakers aspiring to the greatest of recongnise, hence, artistic validation, need that a great european entity validates them by travelling to Cannes in search of this validation and recognition from the industry, not from the public. Thus, this artistic entity, within its second in importance official section, requires all of cinema texts to contain a story in which characters are violated and abused, whom are not capable of modifying the state of things, whos nuclear Mexican family's entity is no longer valid, and, above all, characters whose happiness, once they have survived the fabula, is denied from them.

Final notes

¹ Also, it is important to note that *Prayers for the Stolen*'s original title in Spanish is *Noche de fuego*, which could be translated as *Night of fire* and will be the only movie from the corpus which has significantly changed its title from Spanish to English. Therefore, its semantic interpretation within non-Spanish speaking audiences would be skewed.

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