

# Cinematographic Dreams and Illusions within the Reality of the Femicides in Juarez, Mexico.

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**Abstract**— The ability of filmmakers to use aural and visual elements frequently allows them to excel in mimicking the likeness of a reality. The directors employ advanced and complex strategies to compel the audience to believe that what is being presented is “real” and that it is being re-presented objectively. Conversely, representations of real-life events have a tendency to blur the limits between what is “real” and dreams or illusions. Such is the case of the films representing the femicides in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. In this paper, I conduct a comparative analysis of three films dealing with these crimes. Specifically, I assess when and how the directors blur distinctions between reality and dreams and between reality and illusion. I also explore possible psychological and conceptual interpretations of these instances. A priori I argue that the blending of reality and dreams is used in these films as a nonlinguistic metaphor for: first, the nightmarish reality lived by femicide victims and their families; and second, the attempt made by some institutions such as the Mexican government and the maquiladora industry to obfuscate the reality of the crimes to protect political interests. Furthermore, I analyze the instances where the limits between reality and illusion or dreams are diffused in light of the theory of the “stylistic effect,” as developed by Michael Riffaterre. I propose that these instances are the incongruous elements which are crucial for the representation of the femicides, for, paradoxically, it is through incongruities in the films that a unified, coherent system of signification is established.

**Keywords**—film; femicide; Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; mimesis; dreams; illusions; Riffaterre

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a neighbor city of El Paso, Texas, hundreds (maybe thousands) of women were abducted, tortured, mutilated, raped, and killed or simply disappeared in mysterious circumstances from 1993 to 2008. Although the femicides have not stopped as of yet, the patterns that characterized the femicides during this period have recently been overshadowed by a different type of murder which involves both men and women and which seems to occur during daylight and in more public places. The large number of femicides, the violence inflicted on the bodies, the obscurity surrounding the investigations and the fact that nobody has been found guilty have attracted attention from a number of groups ranging from activists and international human rights associations to directors and writers who have joined the voices

of families of the victims to denounce, with their own means, the injustice and impunity of these killings. Interestingly, one common denominator found in some of the films dealing with these real-life events is the tendency to present sequences where the boundary between reality and dreams (or imaginary occurrences) is blurred. In this paper, I analyze this metaphor in three films, *Espejo retrovisor* (2002), *Bordertown* (2006), and *Traspatio* (2009).

The dream metaphor in film started in the early twentieth century with the works of Ricciotto Canudo, who insisted on transforming reality in conformity to inner dreams, and Jean Epstein, who emphasized the affinity between film and dreams [1]. Towards the end of the century, other theories referring to this affinity arose, such as the one developed by Roland Barthes, in which he stresses the para-oneiric quality of cinematic spectatorship [2]; and the one developed by Christian Metz, in which he highlights the voyeuristic and fetishistic characteristics of cinema [3]. To analyze the affinity between film and dreams, this study departs from some of these theories but it also explores Michael Riffaterre’s concept of the “stylistic effect” [4]. Previous to the discussion, I will provide a summary of the plot of each film.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE FILMS

### A. *Bordertown*

This film is the story of Lauren (Jennifer Lopez), who is a successful journalist for a newspaper in Chicago. She was born in Mexico but she was adopted by an American family. Lauren has to go to Mexico to cover the Juarez femicides. At first she is reluctant to go, but the idea of getting a promotion encourages her. Soon after arriving in Juarez, Lauren meets Eva, a young maquiladora worker who was recently raped, tortured, beaten, and left for dead in the desert. Lauren is determined to protect Eva and to help her find the perpetrators. Eva and Lauren work together to find the culprits and they succeed. To their frustration, they realize that Aris - one of Eva’s attackers - cannot be put in jail, for he belongs to one of the richest families in Juarez and therefore is untouchable. Lauren’s frustration climbs to immeasurable levels when she learns that, for this same reason, the newspaper for which she works will not publish her article. Aris’s family has strong liaisons with maquiladora owners and other business people in

the US and Mexico, and according to Lauren's boss, it is not prudent to publicize a negative image of maquiladoras. Lauren quits her job in Chicago and stays in Juarez working for the local newspaper. Aris tries to kill her, but Eva comes to her rescue and manages to kill him.

The director Gregory Nava portrays these gender crimes by means of an action-adventure film in which fast-paced components are abundant. The film also has various instances where a distinction between dreams and reality and between imagination and reality is hard to draw. One example is found in the following sequence: Lauren takes Eva to her hotel to protect her from her attackers and from the police. Eva is trying to rest but she hears noises, she gets up, and by the door she sees or imagines seeing her attacker, Aris. She leaves the hotel in frenzy and Lauren runs after her.

In a practical sense, this sequence is needed to trigger Eva's escape, which in turn initiates Lauren's desperate search for Eva on the streets of Juarez, where there is a high concentration of night clubs, discothèques, bars, and brothels. This sequence serves to call attention to the binomial good/bad woman dichotomy in which the femicides victims are frequently confined when an attempt to reconstruct their identity is made. This tendency to resort to the dichotomy is due either to the negative image that some media or the Mexican police have constructed of the victims or to the inherent stigma attached to victims of sexual crimes. The sequence clearly contrasts Eva and the young Mexican prostitutes who are in the brothels and on the streets, and it stresses that Eva (and maybe some of the femicides victims) was not at all involved with that "wild" lifestyle and therefore did not contribute to her abduction, rape, and torture.

In a more hermeneutic approach, the fuzziness between what Eva sees and what she imagines can be analyzed in light of the ideas of Francesco Casetti, who argues that cinema is seen as directly modeled on our psychic apparatus. Specifically, he explains that the procedures behind films reproduce the mechanisms that construct dreams, mental lapses, and hallucinations [5].

Thus, the uncertainty the viewer experiences in not knowing whether Aris's presence in the hotel room is real or imaginary models the viewer's psychic apparatus. That is to say, the blurriness aims to reproduce the mechanisms constructing the viewer's own mental gaps. The film casts doubt on Eva and so does the viewer. Even Lauren, after talking to Teresa, doubts Eva. Teresa is the owner of the house where Eva is staying but she is also acquainted with Aris's family. Teresa's objective is to stop Lauren from investigating who is behind the femicides. Consequently, she assures Lauren that Eva and her people cannot distinguish between what they live and what they imagine. Lauren then tries to convince Eva that nobody was in the hotel room but Eva insists that it was the devil, "el diablo." This statement makes the already blurry real/imaginary boundary constructed in the previous sequences even blurrier. However, in a later sequence, Eva, who is still staying at Teresa's house, sees Aris spying on her from the garden, but this time a scene shows that Aris is indeed in the garden and that Eva did not imagine it. Now the film is shaping

the viewer's mental lapse in a different direction: to believe Eva's "reality."

Inarguably, these instances where the real and the imaginary are indistinguishable open up the semiotic character of the film. This brings to mind the theory of the "stylistic effect" developed by Michael Riffaterre. Riffaterre contends that when we read a book, we do not have direct access to the encoder, the referents, or any reality outside the book; therefore we act as the decoders of the text and the book is the message itself. He claims that reality and the author are substitutes for the text. This concept can be extrapolated to film, for the viewer also acts as a decoder of the message, since the reality and the director are also substitutes for the film. And like the text, a film clearly demonstrates that it is constructed in such a way that it can control its own decoding and can act on the viewer as much as the viewer acts on it. According to Riffaterre, the "stylistic unit" is what makes the text's mechanisms and significance apparent to the reader.

Riffaterre defines the stylistic unit as a dyad made up of inseparable poles. The first creates a "probability" and the second frustrates that probability, so that the contrast between the two results in a "stylistic effect." The first pole is a series of expected, mimetic utterances that appear normal at first glance. The second pole is a series of incongruous elements that come in and disrupt the grammar of the text. These incongruities allow the reader to jump from mimesis to semiosis and thereby to gain access to the significance of the text. I argue that in film, the incongruous elements that allow the viewer to decipher the film's mechanisms and grasp its significance are precisely the instances where real events and dreams (or illusions) are indistinguishable. For example, in *Bordertown* - as it might be expected - there are mimetic utterances or clichés that create a "possibility," such as the large number of femicides, the city of Juarez, the physical and socio-demographic profile of the victims, and the violence inflicted to the bodies. But the viewer also encounters incongruous instances where it is hard to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, such as the scenes where Eva sees or imagines seeing Aris and the scenes where Lauren dreams about Aris and where she sees or imagines seeing his reflection in the mirror as if he were behind her. These instances confront the viewer with an obvious distortion of mimesis; for him or her, the film now refers to nothing and loses its meaning temporarily. The viewer then tries to superimpose his or her own interpretation on the film, an interpretation that will change as it progresses.

As for the possible interpretations of the incongruous elements, I propose that Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory is crucial for understanding them, since the two protagonists for whom the film indicates blurriness between what they see and what they imagine are femicide victims / survivors, and since the menacing real/imaginary image is always the perpetrator Aris. Mulvey proposes that regardless of their behavior, female figures are doomed to be controlled and objectivized by the "gaze" of the male protagonists in the film and even by the "gaze" of the male viewer [6]. Aris is the subject who objectivizes Eva and Lauren both in reality by means of his sexual impositions, and in dreams (or daydreams) with his presence (or imaginary presence). Aris's gaze persists even

when Eva and Lauren are away from him. He still tries to possess and control them, first, because they represent a pleasurable experience, and second, because they embody a threat to him: the fear of being entrapped, the fear of castration. According to Mulvey, the male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: counterbalance by the devaluation or punishment of the guilty object, or else turn it into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. Aris, of course, chooses the first avenue, which is more voyeuristic and sadistic, as a way to escape from castration anxiety, for he attempts to punish them by raping Eva and by trying to kill both of them. As for the gaze of the male spectator, he tends to identify with one of the male characters, and in so doing, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. In short, the analysis of the incongruous elements from a feminist perspective serves as a discursive explanation of the femicides as a way to punish women for revolting against a phallogocentric culture.

In a broader sense, the blurriness of the aforementioned sequences in *Bordertown* is a metaphor of the blurriness surrounding the Juarez femicides: the imprecision of the number of known victims, the poor tracking of the perpetrators, the uncertain investigations, etc. The main difference is that in the film, the blurriness of some sequences is clarified as the film progresses whereas in real life the blurriness of the femicides is perpetual.

#### B. *Traspatio*

*Traspatio* is the story of Blanca Bravo, a Mexico City police officer who will soon become the police chief in Ciudad Juarez. While Blanca is being trained to assume her new position, she is investigating the femicides. With the help of the social worker Sara, Blanca gets clues which take her to some suspects: an Egyptian man, the “Cheros” gang, and businessman Mickey Santos. All these men allegedly rape and kill women for sexual pleasure. Blanca investigates them and manages to incarcerate the gang and the Egyptian, but this only provokes the anger of the police chief, who warns Blanca to stop her investigations or else she will get fired. Blanca soon discovers that the police chief receives money from the perpetrators to cover up their crimes. At the end of the film, Blanca comes across Santos abducting a school girl and kills him right on the spot. Knowing that her career is over and that she could even confront charges for killing Santos, Blanca gives up her life in Juarez and crosses the US border.

Although the film has a little of a detective plot, it does not have a unified plot or story line; it does not focus on a single thread of continuous action. The femicide cases are presented in the film like isolated files; they cross Blanca’s path, but there is not a strong cause-and-effect relationship between them. In this film there is also a sequence where the boundary between reality and imaginary is blurred: Blanca learns that in the middle of the desert there is a clandestine industrial refrigerator where presumably women’s bodies are kept fresh while their internal organs are carved out. Blanca and Sara drive along through the desert and find the subterranean refrigerator,

Blanca descends, and she sees or imagines seeing the naked bodies of some twenty women hanging from the roof with their internal organs carved out. Blanca immediately ascends and tells Sara that she did not find anything there.

From a practical perspective, the artificiality of the scene where the real and the imaginary are indistinguishable may have been used to deliver a tolerable violent scene, that is, a scene that in spite being violent, would allow the viewer to continue watching it. Schlesinger *et al.* argue that artificiality in a scene generates significant aesthetic pleasure and emotional distance for viewers, who can use these cues as a means of insulating themselves from the depicted violence [7]. In other words, the viewer is aware that what he is watching “is not real.”

Conceptually, this blurriness could be regarded as the incongruous element that draws attention to the causes of the femicides as presented in the film. The scene supports the theory that women were being killed for organ-trafficking. However, the fuzziness of the scene serves to evoke other theories such as powerful Mexican (or American) people killing women for sexual pleasure, narco-Satanism, snuff films, and copycat killing as a recreational activity. These theories are mentioned in many representations, but none of them has been officially given as the real cause.

#### C. *Espejo retrovisor*

This film focuses on the quotidian and uneventful life of Paloma before she becomes a femicide victim. Paloma is a young middle-class woman who lives with her parents and her sister in Ciudad Juarez. She is an excellent student in a Catholic high school. She falls in love with Jorge, a new student in her school. Jorge apparently enjoys the advantages of wealth, but in reality he resents the fact that he is mostly ignored by his parents. The lack of attention and the misconduct he observes in his parents (they both have affairs outside their marriage) have encouraged Jorge to conceive life as something without attachments and based on breaking rules. However, Paloma teaches him a new meaning of living and of being loved. Ironically, once the relationship of Paloma and Jorge is established and flourishing, Paloma is abducted, raped, and killed. The killer is a destitute young man who was abandoned in the streets as a child and has dedicated his life to robbery and other acts of vandalism.

The plot of this film is to a certain extent episodic, for the events bear no direct, cause-and-effect relationship to each other. Instead, most of them contribute to the viewer’s understanding of Paloma’s character. The sequence where reality and daydreaming is indistinguishable develops as follows: Paloma is in her bedroom looking at sheets of paper on which she wrote poems for Jorge. The next scene shows Paloma and Jorge playing in the park together with the sheets. In the next scene, Paloma is again in her bedroom in exactly the same position as in the initial scene. Her sister approaches her and asks her whom the poems are for, but Paloma playfully evades the question, and as she gets up, she explains that she has to go to the store. It is in that outing that she gets abducted.

Hermeneutically, the fuzziness of the sequence works as the incongruous element that opens up the film for interpretation. I

propose that the sequence calls to mind the focus of the film itself: the life of the victim. *Espejo retrovisor* is one of the few representations of the femicides (if not the only one) that really focuses on the life of a victim rather than the violent acts of the perpetrators or the socio-political circumstances in Juarez before and after the femicides. Maria Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba argues that this film represents the problem of the femicides from a different perspective: first, Paloma subverts the stereotype of the unchaste woman of Juarez, and second, the film, while presenting a patriarchal, classist, and troubled society, gives a voice to the victims and privileges the lives of the women of Ciudad Juárez rather than their deaths [8]. It is exactly in this sequence that the film evokes the life that Paloma is looking forward to living and that she is prevented from living. At the same time, this fictional case portrays the cases of the hundreds of women who – like Paloma – were unjustly deprived from the continuation of their lives.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, it was noted that the three cinematic representations of the Juarez femicides make an effort to present a reality before the viewer objectively. Conversely, they also tend to blur the limits between what is “real” and dreams or illusions. Therefore the dreams/illusions metaphor was scrutinized in detail for a possible explanation. Michael Riffaterre’s theory about the “stylistic effect” was considered for the analysis. Riffaterre points out that incongruous elements contained in a text are especially apt to trigger and control the reader’s hermeneutic behavior. Here I propose that this theory can be applied to film and that the blurriness in some sequences can be regarded as the incongruous element (stylistic units) that opens up the diegesis for interpretation.

As for the significance of the films, it is concluded that *Bordertown*, with its stylistic units blurring the real and the imaginary, highlights the fact that the victims-survivors are perpetually objectified by the perpetrator. In a more conceptual approach, the incongruous elements point to a discursive explanation of the femicides as a way to punish women for revolting against a phallogocentric culture. In *Traspatio*, the stylistic unit draws attention to possible causes of the femicides and the impossibility of explaining clearly who killed these women. These units also point to the fuzziness of the chain of happenings following the Juarez femicides: the inexactness of the number of known victims, the stalled investigations, the perhaps wrongly indicted culprits, etc. For its part, *Espejo retrovisor* evokes the fact that the victims were human beings rather than just a statistic among the large number of femicides and that their lives deserve more attention than the violence inflicted on their bodies or the socio-political circumstances surrounding their death. In conclusion, the blurry sequences are the incongruous elements which are crucial for the representation of the femicides, for, paradoxically, it is through incongruities in the films that a unified, coherent system of signification is established.

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