

TOWARD A CINEMA OF SLOW VIOLENCE

Juan Llamas-Rodriguez

The most remarked-upon scene in *Heli* (Amat Escalante, 2013) occurs two-thirds of the way through the film when members of a drug gang kidnap the protagonist Heli and his brother-in-law Beto, then beat them repeatedly, and finally set Beto's crotch on fire. The sequence stands out in a film that otherwise lingers on long takes with little action and wide shots of expansive fields. The violent apex focalized much of the audience's reception upon the film's premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. Notable as it is, the popular attention this moment garnered has also distracted from the film's broader implications. Understanding how violence unfolds in *Heli* requires not only acknowledging the function of spectacular depictions such as this infamous torture scene but also realizing the effects of less spectacular sequences, an aspect overlooked in most of the reception to the film.

Heli's art cinema sensibilities attracted positive responses, garnering Escalante the Best Director award at Cannes. But its graphic and willfully gratuitous (as some argued) use of violence provoked even greater negative reactions. *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis reacted negatively to the film immediately after its Cannes premiere. According to Dargis, *Heli* was "one of those exploitation films that sells its violent goods with art cinema pretension."¹ She wrote, of the graphic scene, that "Escalante presents [it] with great calculation and numerous art film clichés . . . [but] without discernible point or politics."² For Dargis and others aligned with her views, the point of the film was precisely its portrayal of violent spectacle, but because this violence had no discernible point, the entire film could be deemed a failure.

In her review, however, Mexican film critic Fernanda Solórzano objects to these assessments. Solórzano criticizes foreign critics for hastily equating *Heli*'s politics with those of other kinds of films known for their spectacles of violence, such as those of Bruno Dumont, Gaspar Noé, and others in the so-called New French Extremity.³ "What [these critics] do not take into account," she writes, "is that, for a Mexican

spectator, Escalante's account is repulsive but not shocking."⁴ Solórzano argues that *Heli* is disturbing not because of its graphic violence but because of the quotidianness within which this violence exists. Escalante uses violence in *Heli* to get at the purportedly insidious amorality within Mexican society out of which such violence emerges.⁵ Contextualizing her reading of the film within the contemporary sociopolitical situation of her country, Solórzano suggests that the film's temporal dissonance and arrhythmic editing combine to create a diegetic world without order or certainty, where the violent events may be striking but are not unexpected, and where the supposed excess pinned on Escalante is actually an apt reflection of daily life.⁶

These conflicting interpretations of *Heli* convey the dilemma involved in how to apprehend and critically assess the wide variety of forms that violence takes in Mexican films about narcotrafficking. Solórzano's recuperative reading of *Heli* not only takes into account the film's multiple cinematic publics but also helpfully situates this spectatorial multiplicity in terms of the Mexican and the international publics' different relation to quotidian, insidious violence. Solórzano's insistence on the everyday realities in Mexico as context for *Heli*'s violent depictions echoes Escalante's own defense of his work. In an interview with *The Guardian*, the director attributes the discrepant receptions to his film to the fact of locals' knowledge of narco-violence as compared with foreigners' purported ignorance.⁷ The discordant reception to *Heli* lies partly with international critics' lack of contextual familiarity, a common problem in the appreciation of global film festival fare. Still, the contrast between Solórzano's and Dargis's analysis of the film goes beyond this distinct critical situatedness.

When set against other critics' dismissals of the film on the grounds of its one strikingly violent scene, Solórzano's defense taps into a broader concern over the dichotomy between spectacular violence and the emergent category of "slow violence." Rob Nixon, writing from an environmental social-justice framework, calls "slow violence" that which "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space."⁸ If violence

is often conceived as an immediate, spectacular event “erupting into instant sensational visibility,” then slow violence is typically not viewed as violence at all.⁹ The insidious nature of slow violence derives from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time.¹⁰ The dynamic that Nixon diagnoses in a geopolitical context is at work in the critical reception to *Heli*. International critics who focused on the sensationalism tended to miss the many other ways that violence was depicted in the film through its less-examined figurations of slow violence.

The schism in the critical reception of *Heli* falls within ongoing debates about the role of aesthetics and politics in Latin American cinema at the turn of the twenty-first century. Critics such as Carlos Monsiváis and Ivana Bentes have responded to the worldwide acclaim of such films as *Amores Perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2001) or *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, Walter Salles, 1998) by criticizing their excessive preoccupation with style and concomitant lack of engagement with sociopolitical issues. Bentes, for instance, echoes Dargis’s dissatisfaction with harrowing cinematic images that lack any overt political project and argues that such stylized images deliver the crude realities lived across Latin America for a predictable network of neoliberal consumption.

In contrast, film scholar Laura Podalsky mounts a defense of these recent Latin American films by arguing on behalf of the political potential of sensational aesthetics. The sensorial appeal of these films foments, for Podalsky, alternative ways of knowing about the region’s traumatic past and present. At the same time, by tapping into a newfound global cinematic grammar, these films bring about new communitarian sensibilities and “affective alliances” that join together audiences around the world.¹¹

A reconsideration of the work of affect in opening up the political potential of globally circulating films could be extended even further to focus particularly on those affective forms that are not bombastic or overly stylized. Given its inclusion of both spectacular and unspectacular violence, *Heli* offers an ideal example of how to approach the problem of slow violence in cinema in general and in films about narco-trafficking in particular. A heuristic “cinema of slow violence” is one where the ethical disposition toward violent depictions is that which characterizes the work a film performs (rather than any specific formal treatment of that violence).

Cinematic depictions of violence have long served as instigators for public engagement by geographically diverse audiences. Karl Schoonover has demonstrated how neorealist films’ use of “spectacles of suffering” in the post-World

War II era became intrinsic to an ethical form of film watching that in turn instigated a response from concerned citizens.¹² A cinema of slow violence is likewise attuned to the ways that cinema facilitates such affective affiliations. However, the issue at the current historical juncture remains how to devise a critical and spectatorial disposition toward cinematic figurations of violence that are not necessarily spectacular. Given the propensity for violent spectacle to distract from other insidious, long-lasting forms of violence, a cinema of slow violence must account for forms of engagement beyond spectacles of suffering. The stronghold of narco-trafficking in the public imagination regarding Latin America in general, and Mexico in particular, provides the ground on which to think through these issues.

Violence in the Cinema of Narco-trafficking

Despite the longer history of violence in cinema, the advent of what could be termed “narcoculture,” or cultural mediations of the phenomenon of narco-trafficking, requires a reassessment of the specific cinematic treatments of violence. Narco-trafficking lends itself to spectacular depictions of violence, aided in part by the heavily reported, US-sponsored “War on Drugs” and by the drug cartels’ own attention-grabbing antics. Cultural productions have capitalized on this fascination. Indeed, as John Beverley points out, “the ‘text of violence’ has become a major trope in Latin Americanist literary and cultural criticism in recent years.”¹³ Whether in studies of literary genres or of national media, violence recurs as a guiding trope in scholarly treatments of narco-trafficking.¹⁴ Despite the hyperbolic claims of the late Argentinean writer Tomás Eloy Martínez, who proclaimed narcoculture as “the culture of the new millennium,” it is undeniable that this phenomenon’s stronghold on contemporary life across the continent necessitates innovative ways of attending to the question of violence in “narcocinema.”¹⁵

Narco-trafficking is rife with violent spectacle. Critical treatments and academic scholarship on violence and narco-trafficking have focused on its explicit, explosive representations in mainstream films and in the action-packed B-movies of northern Mexico. Paul Julian Smith’s analysis of the critical reception of mainstream narco-films *Miss Bala* (Gerardo Naranjo, 2011), *Saving Private Pérez* (Beto Gómez, 2011), and *El Infierno* (Luis Estrada, 2010) illustrates the power of satire and aesthetic excess in simultaneously depicting narco-violence and critiquing its conditions of possibility.¹⁶ Similarly, in his exploration of narco-themed straight-to-video movies popular along the US-Mexico border, Ryan Rashotte explains how genre expectations dictate that violent spectacles in these



Heli disposes of the drugs in a well.

films follow repetitive, often kitschy setups. Yet Rashotte finds a redemptive possibility in this generic repetition, suggesting that cinema becomes therapeutic, “help[ing] make sense of the drug war’s tragedies by compulsively revisiting them on familiar terms.”¹⁷ Smith and Rashotte both consider the relation of local audiences to the violent depictions on-screen and suggest that fictional spectacle could prove cathartic for publics already enmeshed in the everyday effects of narco-violence. In such a context, the example of *Heli* is doubly generative.

First, the film’s narrative eschews the extravagance of other narco-themed features, unfolding instead as a slice-of-life narrative for most of its running time. The titular character lives with his wife, younger sister, and father in a small house in a nondescript area of northern Mexico. Heli and his father work alternate shifts at a nearby *maquiladora*, a NAFTA-enabled assembly factory for tariff-free exports, while his sister Estela regularly skips school to spend time with her older boyfriend Beto, who is training to join the anti-cartel militia of the federal police force. The film’s disruptive event is Beto’s theft of confiscated drugs from a police station and his subsequent stashing of them in Heli’s cistern. When local drug gangs come looking for the drugs, they discover that Heli has disposed of them and decide to torture Heli and Beto, and kidnap Estela in retaliation—resulting in the infamous torture scene, Beto’s eventual

death, and Estela’s disappearance. The aftermath reverberates throughout the film.

At a moment when official accounts continually underreport the death toll of narco-related crimes, spectacular depictions in the media constitute only a small fraction of the large-scale effects that narcotrafficking wreaks upon the Americas.¹⁸ A pressing issue of the moment, rather, is how to make visible the disastrous effects of narcotrafficking that remain overlooked or unacknowledged because they are not as readily captured as part of this phenomenon despite their equally pernicious effects. *Heli*’s decentering of the narco-narrative from traffickers to regular people creates an opening to make salient the pervasive, continuous nature of violence beyond its already well-known spectacular instances within narcotrafficking.

Second, the international notoriety of *Heli*—for one scene, rather than for its overall narrative themes—revives the question of the audience’s situatedness in responding to depictions of narco-violence. David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez have argued that many contemporary Latin American films circulating in international film festivals subscribe to an “aesthetics of auto-erasure,” whereby a film’s national origin is displaced in favor of an “anyplace” rendered through aesthetic tropes familiar to global art cinema audiences.¹⁹ In contrast, films about narcotrafficking



Burning piles of drugs in *Heli*.

tend to emphasize their national origin and circulate among the locales where this phenomenon is most starkly experienced every day. Entering the film festival world while tackling the specific national implications of narco-trafficking, *Heli* synthesizes two patterns of circulation that are not without contradiction. For publics far removed from the daily occurrences of narco-violence, *Heli*'s spectacular depictions may lose the cathartic value that Smith and Rashotte have diagnosed. Such spectacles of violence can then easily veer into being received instead as exploitative escapism. A major challenge in contending with the slow violence of narco-trafficking is thus how to make visible both imperceptible violence and imperceptible change by devising "arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects."²⁰

Arresting images of the pervasive effects of slow violence abound in *Heli*: the arid, endless road that Heli and his father have to walk to and from work under an unforgiving sun; a pile of seized drugs, burning incessantly as a display of the government's futile attempts to rein in the drug trade; a cow, trapped helplessly in a well, prophesizing the characters' fates. Nothing here is sensational enough to command attention, yet everywhere one looks, there are residues of the toll that the economic, political, and social transformations of the last two decades have taken on the most disenfranchised communities

in Mexico. It is this embeddedness to which Fernanda Solórzano alludes in her defense of the film, arguing that the quotidian of violence in the world of *Heli* gestures decisively at the distinct imperceptible aspects of this violence.

In this regard, Solórzano's claims are related to Lauren Berlant's proposal of "crisis ordinariness" as a way to describe how people confront and adapt to unfolding trauma in contemporary society.²¹ Crisis is not exceptional, Berlant suggests, but rather "a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming."²² There is no way out of this precarious life for the characters in this world—at least, no way that they can perceive or achieve. Acquiescing to the quotidian crisis is the only coping mechanism left to them. Because this crisis is overwhelming and never-ending, its effects get folded into the fabric of everyday life, rendering them unspectacular but no less critical. Berlant proposes crisis ordinariness as a corrective to the exceptionality of the traumatic event, a critical move not unlike Rob Nixon's identification of slow violence as a way of displacing spectacular violence. Both theorists are calling for an examination of how, in Berlant's words, "the affective impact [of this violence] takes form, becomes mediated."²³

Narco-trafficking provides a useful archive of case studies for a theorization of a cinema of slow violence because the phenomenon is emblematic of spectacular depictions of



Scenes of quotidian violence in *Heli*.



violence as well as unspectacular ones, as in *Heli*. While this overview of narco-films foregrounds Mexican and US-Mexico features, a similar trove of productions could be found, for instance, in Brazilian or Colombian cinemas. The national and contextual specificity of arguments may provide granularity to the theorization of a cinema of violence, but the arguments set forth are applicable and generative in circumstances and cinemas far beyond those figured here.

Acknowledging a Cinema of Slow Violence

Rob Nixon's formulation of a cinema of slow violence foregrounds the question of how to "environmentalize" violence—that is, how to attend to dispersed temporalities and spatialities, account for reverberations and feedbacks, and trace implications that exceed the straightforwardness of cause and effect. Any attempt to environmentalize violence requires the sort of approach that Bishnupriya Ghosh terms "ecologic"—that is, a logic of interconnected systems of human and nonhuman relations.²⁴ Such an analytical move would call for tracing macro-level configurations within filmic sequences that still retain their narrative coherence.

Heli pictures just such interconnected systems in its sequences of Beto's training for the Mexican anti-cartel militia. Supervised by American DEA agents, Mexican soldiers order around a group of young men, seemingly less than eighteen years old, through a grueling routine. In typical military fashion, surrender is not an option. During one of these trainings, Beto proves incapable of finishing a drill; having vomited from exhaustion, he lies on his knees in the middle of a field. His training officer and the DEA supervisor approach and berate him for failing. As punishment and humiliation, he is made to roll over his vomit, but misses it, tries again, and so on, until the DEA agent, impatient with his slowness, grabs Beto by the boots and drags him face-down over his

own vomit. This scene is followed by another humiliating punishment, this time one in which officers hold another trainee over the hole in the ground that serves as a toilet.

Such sequences portray the everyday harsh conditions of militia training as another effect of narco-trafficking. The scene of the DEA agent dragging Beto is emblematic, as it alludes to the participation of both Mexican and American police forces in enabling and perpetuating certain forms of violence. At the same time, Escalante insists on focusing on the disenfranchised populations that constitute the last point of violent contact: teenagers like Beto, with no schooling and little hope of economic prosperity, for whom becoming a cadet seems the only viable career path. The sequence progresses visually from a wide shot to increasingly tighter framing as the DEA agent's humiliation tactics become more abject in their effects, functioning as a reminder that the violent acts enacted upon one cadet are merely a single instance in a wider system of entangled relations. The sequence's depiction of slow violence thus implicates a broader set of actors in the causal chains of narco-trafficking.

Mitigating the catastrophic consequences of such causal chains requires addressing a key representational challenge: how to render slow violence comprehensible to the senses. Reevaluating Bazinian realism, Daniel Morgan proposes "acknowledgement" as a way to account for how cinema responds to, makes sense of, or takes a stand toward the reality of its filmic objects.²⁵ His notion of acknowledgement retains the ontological foundation of realism while allowing for its aesthetic variety across films. A film counts as realist if it constructs a style that acknowledges the reality being conveyed.²⁶ The film must do something with the knowledge of its medium, but what it does remains open for individual films to achieve: "[i]n the acknowledgment, a film produces a particular reading."²⁷

Morgan's assessment of realism helps to parse the ethical and aesthetic aims that are fused in Nixon's conception of slow violence, in which attending to the mediation of imperceptible violence is tantamount to finding particular aesthetic strategies that can perform this mediation. Nixon's theoretical model assumes that specific aesthetic strategies are inherently primed for the figuration of slow violence. Yet, it is possible that the aesthetic strategies deployed to treat slow violence in one case would not readily translate to another instance or medium.

Consider, for instance, Jorge Michel Grau's *72* (2011), a short produced as an episode of TNT Latin America's *Fronteras* television series. It depicts the kidnap and murder of seventy-two civilians by cartel operatives. Grau provides neither context nor resolution, allowing the confusion and disorientation of the captives to dictate the affective tone of the feature. With few lines of dialogue, the soundtrack conveys emotional heft through the ambient noises of a farm field, the suffused panting of the captives, and the forceful pang of each gunshot. Grau's short feature does not follow Escalante's work in conveying slow violence as a quotidian occurrence, focusing instead on one extremely tense, violent moment. Yet his *72* episode still uses the medium to depict violence as the result of an interconnected causal chain. In fifteen minutes, the short maximizes its condensed running time and its location within the flow of other programming in order to suggest that this sequence is merely a piece of a larger puzzle. In doing so, Grau gestures toward the need for conceptualizing an ecologic when depicting the violence wrought by narcotrafficking. The construction in media reutilizes televisual flow instead of resorting to narrative depictions in order to instigate a sensibility encompassing broader systemic issues. (Similarly, this dynamic worked yet again when *72* was later included in international film festivals as part of a program of multiple shorts.)

Therefore, a determination of a "cinema of slow violence" attends to the ethical disposition toward, rather than any specific aesthetic treatment of, violent depictions in films. Further, such a category could be characterized by an acknowledgement that the depiction of instances that do not readily figure as violence may demand a practice of medium-specific formal strategies. Escalante's oeuvre proves generative for thinking through a cinema of slow violence because of his attentiveness to specific forms of spectatorial disposition. In particular, he admits that his work aims to mobilize an affective engagement with violence as "a sensation that invades one's entire body."²⁸

Before *Heli* accrued its notoriety, Escalante had mobilized a similar dynamic in his previous film, *Los Bastardos* (2008).²⁹



Aftermath of the torture scene in *Heli*.

Building a slice-of-life narrative around two Mexican immigrants in the United States, the film veers into a spectacularly violent sequence when these men break into a home and assault the intoxicated white woman who lives there. The first half of the film depicts the slow violence that permeates migrants' lives in the United States. Rather than justifying the men's violent actions, however, the contrasting depictions of cinematic violence force an acknowledgement that isolated acts of violence often eclipse more insidious, widespread forms of quotidian violence. The film is self-reflexive about this acknowledgment: when the men murder the woman, the television plays news coverage of Americans complaining about immigrant gang violence. This may be the normative depiction of violence, Escalante seems to say, but it is hardly the only one.

This proposed "cinema of slow violence" should not be confused with the already-hailed "cinema of slowness," which is most often theorized as a response to the speeding up of modern life and the parallel treatment of time in contemporary narrative films.³⁰ In that cinema of slowness, filmmakers utilize formal strategies to construct slowness, and the critic's job becomes one of evaluating the success of these strategies. Although some slow films such as *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2007) focus on the marginalized poor, forgotten, and thoroughly disenfranchised, aesthetic slowness per se does not guarantee any attention to the slow violence that disenfranchised these peoples in the first place. In fact, the impetus to attend to the aesthetics of slowness may render this kind of violence as invisible here as the contrary aesthetics of spectacular violence tend to do. As Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge have acknowledged, slow cinema is an "unstructured film movement" characterized only by a "comparable style," an extended temporal rhythm.³¹

In contradistinction, the slowness that characterizes a cinema of slow violence refers not to cinematic pace but rather to



The factory workers in *Heli*.

the temporality of violence, both in the film and off-screen. In this sense, a cinema of slow violence is less a film movement than a set of filmmaking and film-watching practices that speak to a shared ethical impetus. Because no single set of formal strategies are aligned with a cinema of slow violence, the “slow violence” can be figured cinematically in forms beyond the visual, neither symbolic nor even representational.

At times in *Heli*, Escalante renders violence unspectacular through an emphasis on aural effects, appealing to nonrepresentational possibilities. There are two scenes inside the *maquiladora* where Heli works, early and late in the film, that illustrate this strategy particularly well. Narratively, the scenes of Heli at work, both before and after his capture and torture, signify the traumatic aftermath of his experience through the ramifications in his daily activities. Yet these scenes also affectively convey the already-strenuous environment wherein he was forced to work.

The initial *maquiladora* scene depicts workers exercising before their shift while a jingle plays on the diegetic soundtrack and the noises of machines remain in the background. This scene then cuts to Heli working at his station, now with the jingle gone and with machine noises instead dominating the soundtrack. Slowly, imperceptibly, these noises become louder. Only after a cut to the next scene of Heli arriving

home at night can one perceive in retrospect the heightened volume of the factory sequences.

The second *maquiladora* scene is starker in its use of ambient noise. It cuts from a minute-long, almost-quiet still shot of Heli crying in his wife’s lap to an establishing shot within the cacophony of the *maquiladora*, where the machines’ incessantly loud noises drown out all dialogue and ambient sound. The subsequent shot follows Heli distractedly working at his station. Here, the soundtrack focuses first on the noises made by the machines and then, after Heli drops a piece of metal, on the sound of the alarm. Along with constantly flashing lights, these alarms create a sensorial assault that contrasts with the quietness of the rest of the film. Notably, human voices remain inaudible in this space even when his coworkers come to help Heli; alarms and machine noises envelop the soundtrack for the remainder of the scene.

Beyond its symbolic aspects, the sonic encounter renders the boisterous working conditions as an affective force. The affective dimension of this encounter is notoriously environmental, as the sounds energetically “take up more space than [the people], and they occupy that space dynamically.”³² The machine noises colonize the space of the film in these *maquiladora* scenes in a manner that is forceful but not pictorially spectacular. Any scene with loud machine ambient noises itself is not emblematic of slow violence, but those in *Heli*

function as such given the film's narrative context and formal structure. Montages of soundscapes in such workplaces become figured as violent, in that their quotidian assault is marked as such, emerging from the realm of the imperceptible through *Heli*'s aural contrasts.

Siegfried Kracauer once proclaimed that cinema "renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences."³³ Per Balazs, cinema helps audiences apprehend aspects of the material world because of the specific formal techniques that it contains as a medium.³⁴ Through its processes of acknowledgement, the medium redeems physical reality. Following Kracauer and Balazs, I would argue that a cinema of slow violence similarly affords the medium new ways to reveal a violence that was previously imperceptible within the normative codes for depicting violence.

Cinema participates in the phenomenological reorientation of modern experience by both training audiences for a new sensorial environment and providing a respite from it.³⁵ It accomplishes those aims through epistemological and phenomenological means, by modifying the relation of distance and nearness between the audience and the film: cinema is like the heavily techno-mediated modern world, but it is not exactly it. As the current media landscape accelerates the speed and scope of techno-mediation, I remain convinced of cinema's capacity for revealing the material world to its audiences. Increasingly, both the techniques deployed in cinema and the acts of perception performed by audiences fuel the medium's revelatory potential. The status of film as a temporal object also contributes to the aims of a cinema of slow violence: in contrast to today's television and web creations, its running time is long enough for an audience's immersion in its world, yet it remains a single, rather than serial, media object to be consumed all at once.

Cinema, as experienced in a darkened room, surrounded by an audience, and with few distractions, can no longer be assumed to be the only form of film spectatorship, but it remains a privileged one. Thus, besides the formal heterogeneity of its cinematic figurations, a cinema of slow violence must also account for divergent spectatorial dispositions. The cinema of slow violence cannot be accomplished solely within the cinematic frame but demands a conscious critical reorientation on the part of the audience.

Slow Violence as a Critical Orientation

In their contrasting critiques of *Heli*, Fernanda Solórzano does not disagree with Manohla Dargis that the film has

art-cinema pretensions, some of which ultimately fall short. Instead, Solórzano's defense is premised on constructing a distinct sensibility for the violence depicted in the film, one that does not focus solely on aesthetics, however central they may be to articulating the importance of the film's project. That premise (in fact, the aim of a cinema of slow violence) is to maintain an openness toward how violence is figured in cinema as well as toward what counts as violence, to realize that these figurations may be contingent and dependent on distinct but evolving formal elements, and to learn that the act of witnessing such figurations of violence on screen includes a prompt to respond to them.

Karl Schoonover has traced cinematic depictions of violence and their attendant witnessing as a call to action in Italian neorealist films. He argues, in contradistinction to the traditional understanding of this corpus as a nationalist aesthetic trend, that neorealist films shared an incitement to "welcome a foreign observer as a much-needed political participant." By figuring the human body in pain, these films sought to "turn watching from a passive form of consumption into an activity replete with palpable geopolitical consequence."³⁶ The cinematic mediation of the body in pain proved a compelling figure that appealed to a shared humanity across nations, thereby creating a global audience of ethical citizens susceptible to the precarious conditions of those across the world.

Neorealism's use of "spectacles of suffering" was intrinsic to its project of calling forth an ethical form of film watching in the post-World War II era. Yet the issue at the current historical juncture remains how to supersede violent spectacle, given its easy coexistence with insidious, long-lasting forms of violence. The problem tackled in a cinema of slow violence is one that is detached from an individualistic and hermeneutically based appeal to perceiving violence, in favor of an ecological, affective, and multisensorial intervention into both the process of filmmaking and the act of watching.

The cinematic act of environmentalizing violence sets it within an interconnected system of spatiotemporal relations and necessarily implicates a variety of agents in this violence, including both those directly subject to violence and those required to witness and acknowledge it. Such acknowledgement runs across lines of class and nation, from the creative laborers to critics to audiences, and sometimes circles back. Each subject is required to adopt an orientation attuned to the mediations of slow violence. In turn, such acknowledgement carries a call to do something, whether making a film, writing a critique, or setting forth a plan of action.

Pursuing a cinema of slow violence is not merely to create yet another category for film classification nor even to suggest a counter-reading practice. Rather, to follow Gayatri Spivak's term, the task of a cinematic "planetarity" should be to force an orientation toward slow violence, where forcing an orientation implies critically rethinking practices of filmmaking, film analysis, and film audience response.³⁷ The saga of *Heli*'s international reception illustrates the power of forcing such an orientation given how much critical debate the film incited, both when it first came out and years later.³⁸ If film has the ability to engender a public space where sensory experience and discursive contestation come together, then the work ahead is to trace how this quality of the medium retains its critical potential at a time of accelerated perception and ever more spectacular representations. The work of cinema in an age of increased connectivity and social interdependence requires the development of newfound orientations toward the reality of this ever more connected and disconnected world and to tap into the political potential of such orientations. Advocating for the notion of a cinema of slow violence is a first step in this direction.

Notes

1. Manohla Dargis, "Ducking Rain and Competition at Cannes," *New York Times*, May 16, 2013, C1.
2. Dargis, "Ducking Rain," C1.
3. The term "New French Extremity" was originally coined by James Quandt in "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," *Artforum*, February 2004. See also Tanya C. Horeck and Tina Kendall, eds., *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), which include Quandt's further reflections, "More Moralism from that 'Wordy Fuck.'"
4. Fernanda Solórzano, "Heli de Amat Escalante," *Letras Libres*, August 2013, 91. Author's translation.
5. Most notably, in a 2014 interview, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto dismissed the endemic corruption in Mexico as "a cultural matter" and repeatedly framed it as an individual rather than systemic issue. See Leon Krauze, "Mexico's President Must Not Ignore This Mass Grave of College Kids or the Corruption It Represents," *The New Republic*, October 10, 2014, www.newrepublic.com/article/119783/enrique-pena-nieto-ignoring-reality-mexicos-corruption. See also Jonathan Tepperman, "Pact for Progress: A Conversation with Enrique Peña Nieto," *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 1 (January/February 2014), www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/interviews/pact-for-progress.
6. Solórzano, "Heli de Amat Escalante," 91.
7. Jo Tuckman, "The *Heli* Director on Why His Film Was Too Brutal—and Honest—for Cannes," *Guardian*, May 15, 2014, www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/15/amat-escalante-heli-cannes-mexico-violence.
8. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.
9. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.
10. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 6.
11. Laura Podalsky, *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4–8.
12. Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xvi–xvii.
13. John Beverley, *Latinamericanism After 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5–6.
14. Jorge Volpi, "La nueva narrativa hispanica de America (en mas de 100 aforismos, casi tuits)," *Nexos* (September 2011), 69–74.
15. Tomás Eloy Martínez, "Los Desafíos de la Cultura Narco," *El País*, February 2, 2010, http://elpais.com/diario/2010/02/02/opinion/1265065204_850215.html.
16. Paul Julian Smith, "Film Fictions of Violence," in *Mexican Screen Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 161–91.
17. Ryan Rashotte, *Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 14.
18. Alejandro Hope, "How Violence in Mexico Is Becoming Invisible," *El Daily Post*, November 3, 2015, www.eldailypost.com/opinion/2015/11/how-violence-in-mexico-is-becoming-invisible/. For a stellar account of the myriad forms in which narco-trafficking wreaks daily violence across the North and South American continent, see Alejandra Inzunza, Jose Luis Pardo, and Pablo Ferri, *Narco América: De los Andes a Manhattan, 55 mil kilómetros tras el rastro de la cocaína* (Barcelona: Grupo Planeta, 2015).
19. David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez, "Uruguay Disappears: Small Cinemas, Control Z Films, and the Aesthetics and Politics of Auto-Erasure," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 28.
20. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 3.
21. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.
22. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.
23. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.
24. Bishnupriya Ghosh, "The Ecologies of Testimony in NBA Documentaries," in Janet Walker and Bhaskar Sarkar, eds., *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 59.
25. Morgan also borrows from Stanley Cavell, who defines acknowledgement as going beyond knowledge because it requires that one do something on the basis of knowledge. See Daniel Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006), 470.
26. Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin," 471.
27. Morgan, "Rethinking Bazin," 471.
28. Fernanda Solórzano, "Entrevista a Amat Escalante," *Letras Libres* (July 2017), 29–33.
29. After the whirlwind reception of *Heli*, however, it seems Escalante has decided to move away from figurations of slow violence. His next feature, *The Untamed* (2016), with its

- science fiction mode and sex-with-aliens tropes, signals a departure from those previous concerns.
30. Song Hwee Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 5.
 31. Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas," in Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, eds., *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 4.
 32. J. Martin Daughtry, "Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence," *Social Text* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 29.
 33. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 300.
 34. Malcolm Turvey, "Balazs: Realist or Modernist?" *October* 115 (Winter 2006), 84.
 35. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), xviii, 152.
 36. Schoonover, *Brutal Vision*, xvi–xvii.
 37. Spivak aims to "force a [new] reading" practice for Comparative Literature that is specifically attuned to the realities of the contemporary global landscape through what she calls "planetary." See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71–102.
 38. See Solórzano, "Entrevista a Amat Escalate," and Tuckman, "The *Heli* Director on Why His Film Was Too Brutal—and Honest—for Cannes."