Affective Tensions: Representing Violence in Contemporary Mexican Women's Cinema

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary women's cinema in Mexico as a site of resistance to mainstream portrayals of gender-based violence (GBV). It focuses on *Noche de Fuego* (Tatiana Huezo, 2021), *Luchadoras* (Paola Calvo and Patrick Jasim, 2021), and *Ruido* (Natalia Beristáin, 2022), alongside personal interviews with Calvo and Beristáin, to explore how these films challenge patriarchal framing of GBV and foreground intersectional, affective, ethical and agency-driven representations. Set against Mexico's ongoing crisis of femicide and disappearances, this research situates these works within broader structures of militarisation, organised crime and impunity. It interrogates how violence against women is embedded in Mexico's neoliberal and narco-capitalist systems, while exposing the limitations of mass media's sensationalist, victim-blaming narratives in generating awareness and encouraging meaningful change. Through a close analysis of cinematic affect, this thesis demonstrates how female-directed cinema mobilises embodied and emotional modes of representation to cultivate proximity, empathy and critical reflection on lived experiences of violence. These affective strategies reveal how fear is weaponised within Mexico's contemporary conflicts and illuminate the long-term social consequences of violence, including its erosion of trust and community, which hinder resistance. Finally, the study considers each film's narrative strategies and collaborative production methods, discussing how they promote women's agency over victimisation. In doing so, they articulate models of security and solidarity grounded in care and collective agency, rather than reliance on state structures.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the role of contemporary Women's cinema in Mexico as a site of resistance and counter-narrative to mainstream media portrayals of gender-based violence (GBV). Through a close reading of three independent films – *Noche de Fuego* by Tatiana Huezo (2021), *Luchadoras* by Paola Calvo and Patrick Jasim (2021) and *Ruido* by Natalia Beristáin (2022) – alongside personal interviews with directors Calvo and Beristáin, I examine how these filmmakers depict distinct female experiences of violence that transcend the dehumanising heteropatriarchal gaze and prioritise intersectionality, affect, ethical representation and agency.

My use of terms such as 'patriarchy' and 'women' is inclusive of trans and queer identities and recognises the intersectional nature of oppression shaped by race, class, and other axes of marginalisation. This lens is central to my analysis, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how GBV is represented and reframed in Mexican cinema. Furthermore, I use the terms femicide and feminicide interchangeably throughout my project. Feminicide was a term developed in Latin America, which, aside from highlighting the gendered dimension of such killings, emphasises the societal and systemic factors, including the role of the state in failing to protect women[1].

Mass media have long been criticised for biased coverage of events, particularly in the realms of war and violence and in contexts influenced by geopolitical interests. Chomsky and Herman (1988) characterise the mass media as a 'propaganda machine' that favours elite narratives over objective information. This pattern is exemplified in a report from the Centre of Media Monitoring for 2023/2024, examining pro-Israel biases within the UK media during the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. The report identifies disparities in language, which minimise Palestinian casualties relative to those of Israelis. While Western outlets frequently diminish Palestinian voices and omit historical context, the Israeli assault on Gaza, described as the 'first livestream genocide,' is being documented and disseminated globally by independent Palestinian journalists such as Bisan Owda and Plestia Alaqad, among others. In addition, Palestinian filmmakers like Yuval Abraham and Basel Adra[2] use film to highlight the extreme threat of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian communities. Together with ordinary Palestinians, these

[1] See Literature Review section 1.1.4.
[2] Creators of Oscar award-winning 2024 documentary *No Other Land*

individuals risk their lives to document the crisis and inform the international community. Whether through livestreaming or films, their work seeks to expose the brutality of the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) and, crucially, to emphasise the resilience and perseverance of their communities, which continue to find ways to love and care for one another amid intense suffering.

These contrasting representations, one shaped by political and economic interests and the other driven by the need to be recognised, understood, and defended as human beings rather than passive victims, strongly resonate with the aims of this research. They raise important questions about how narratives of violence reinforce power structures, obscure state accountability, and sustain victimhood. They also invite scrutiny of mass media as a means of control, cultivating fear, dependence on authority, and the desire for security rather than social change, thus further disempowering oppressed and global communities. Considering this, borrowing the words of Zygmunt Bauman from his critique of violence (2008), I ask: How might we engage the wider public in critical dialogue about past and ongoing violence? How might stories of violence against marginalised communities illuminate structural roots and inspire meaningful engagement? Can alternative media and cinema challenge systemic violence and affirm the agency of oppressed groups? Who tells these stories, and through what mediums? What does resistance and agency look like amid extreme violence? The following sections situate this inquiry within the Mexican context of femicide and disappearances, introducing key theoretical frameworks and mapping the structure and contributions of my thesis.

GBV is on the rise in Mexico, with cases of femicide and disappearance having increased sharply over the past twenty years. According to official figures from the National Public Security System, nearly 43,000 women were murdered between 2006 and 2021, a crisis that feminist organisations and scholars link to the militarisation of national security, organised crime, and state complicity. As Palacios clarifies, femicide in Mexico is a social issue that affects not only women and girls but society, which is immersed in a climate of widespread violence (2019). Mexico's so-called 'war on drugs,' referring to the ongoing conflict between the Mexican government and various drug cartels, has created these conditions. The conflict intensified significantly after Felipe Calderón took office in 2006, as he shifted the strategy towards deploying military forces, leading to the growth of cartels and heightened feelings of insecurity among the general population.

Latin American Theorists Rita Segato and Sayak Valencia, along with many others whose work I will discuss in my literature review (sections 1.1.3 & 1.1.4), offer critical intersectional frameworks that emphasise the role of women's bodies in these contemporary conflicts. Segato and Valencia's work is particularly useful for its interrogation of the impact of Mexico's recent socio-political and economic shifts to capitalism and neoliberalism within the narco-context. For example, in 'Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres' (2014), Segato asserts that, within Mexico's contemporary wars, violence against women (VAW) is not merely incidental or collateral but performative, used to send messages of fear and dominance in the absence of formal authority. Likewise, Valencia's notions of 'gore capitalism' and 'necroempowerment' (2010) depict how spectacularised violence becomes a currency in a system where brutality is normalised as a part of economic participation. From these perspectives, femicides and disappearances are intricately linked to capitalism's devaluation of lives, especially those of poor, Brown, female bodies, during an era marked by impunity and governmental austerity.

Mainstream media narratives and cinematic representations in the Narco film genre have further entrenched these gendered and racialised power asymmetries[3]. Berlanga Gayón's concept of *encuadres del patriarcado* ('patriarchal framing') (2018) critiques how media representation is shown through a patriarchal lens, which silences women and justifies their disposability. Such images contribute to a *pedagogía de miedo* ('pedagogy of fear') – warning women and society against transgressing social norms. Valencia argues that these representations uphold the logic of 'gore capitalism,' fostering public indifference and obstructing collective action (2010). Additionally, as in Palestine, independent journalists reporting on such crimes are among the most threatened in the country, underscoring the urgent need for alternative modes of representation and education.

The work of filmmakers and scholars has laid the foundation for new representational frameworks that keep narratives of femicide and disappearance alive within the social imaginary[4], while avoiding the reproduction of harmful imagery that could exacerbate existing social dynamics. Affect theory, although lacking a single definition, is understood as an interdisciplinary framework that focuses on feelings, sensations and forces that move and motivate things into

[3] See Literature Review sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2.
[4] See Literature Review section 1.2.4.

relational existence (Truran, 2022) and is sometimes used interchangeably with emotions. It has become a crucial lens for analysing women's experiences of violence, trauma, and resilience, which is visible in the work of scholars Nuala Finnegan (2020) and Olivia Cosentino (2021)[5]. Their research challenges traditional visual narratives of violence and highlights intimate, affective, and embodied experiences, offering new methodological approaches that create emotional closeness between the viewer and the protagonist. In this way, they encourage us to reflect more deeply on violence, resistance, and memory.

Taking this body of work into account, my project investigates the capacity of female-directed fictional and documentary films to ethically portray stories of GBV without resorting to exploitation, sensationalism, or victim-blaming tropes. The structure of my research is outlined as follows. The Literature Review will explore contemporary global, Latin American, and Mexican theories and concepts relevant to my project. Chapter two, Structures of Violence, analyses the socio-political and economic contexts of each film and their cinematic representation, demonstrating how they reveal the structural nature of GBV. Drawing on Segato's theorisations of violence (2008-2023) and Valencia's concept of 'gore capitalism' (2010), I adopt an intersectional lens to highlight how these films depict Mexico's interconnected systems of violence within its modern-colonial-narco heteropatriarchy. I argue that film functions as a critical medium for exposing practices, systems and behaviours that sustain GBV, often obscured in the media. These works, therefore, challenge reductive portrayals of GBV as merely a 'women's issue' and instead advocate for more accountable representation and collective forms of resistance.

Chapter three, Atmospheres of Violence, examines how the selected films portray embodied and affective forms of violence that are often eclipsed by sensationalist narratives. Drawing on feminist geographers (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2015; Christian and Dowler, 2019) and affect theorist Sara Ahmed (2010), I examine how these film's construct 'atmospheres of violence' through cinematic techniques such as sound design, camera movements, and close-up framing, to communicate the gendered experience of living under conditions of extreme violence. These strategies immerse viewers in the protagonist's emotional landscapes, conveying how fear is reinforced and naturalised through a complex interplay of personal histories and

[5] See Literature Review section 1.2.4.

media portrayals. I suggest that such techniques generate an 'affective tension' and relationality that directly opposes the dehumanising and othering *encuadres del patriarcado* and *pedagogía de miedo* (Berlanga Gayón, 2018) perpetuated by the media. Rather than shocking viewers or reinforcing narratives of victimhood, this affective lens encourages critical engagement with violent events and their broader psychological and societal implications. In doing so, these films reveal how fear can be weaponised within Mexico's contemporary conflicts to suppress mobilisation and resistance. I also assess their use of symbolic and abstract imagery, which mirrors the omnipresence of violence as a constant threat woven into everyday life. These cinematic strategies critique the structures that perpetuate victimisation without resorting to exploitation or sensationalism, offering instead a nuanced and critical understanding of suffering within *las nuevas guerras*.

Chapter four, Ethical Representation, Complex Gendered Agency and Violence, analyses the director's employment of ethically grounded and collaborative approaches, which foster more authentic and political forms of representation. I consider the role of the film director, emphasising how their work falls at the intersection of the personal and political, representing an act of feminist agency and resistance. Despite this, I strive to decentralise their role, instead emphasising the collaborative production strategies they employ, such as the involvement of non-actors, activists, and organisations. I consider how such strategies are vital for challenging the director's subjectivity and for expanding the film's political potential. I examine how these practices cultivate narrative agency and consider the ways such agency might extend beyond the screen. Moreover, I detail the narrative structures and cinematographic techniques that promote affective proximity and narrative autonomy. Drawing on the concept of *complex gendered agency* (Zulver, 2024), I emphasise how each film situates agency within specific contexts of violence. Having identified the structural and emotional forms of violence shaping girls and women's lives, I demonstrate how the films reimagine resistance, agency and security as the ability to express care and build solidarity amidst suffering. Ultimately, I argue that cinema becomes a vital tool for disrupting dominant portrayals of Mexican women and girls as passive or disposable, instead repositioning them as active agents of social transformation.

This study contributes to an expanding body of research on the visual representation of GBV, challenging the patriarchal framing that perpetuates women's

victimisation and downplays state responsibility. It calls for an intersectional lens that considers the range of socio-political and economic factors behind instances of GBV and critiques the increasing desensitising effects of graphic media. By focusing on affect and embodiment in cinematic portrayals of violence, this research promotes ethical engagement with violence and its emotional and physical impacts, as well as its overlooked societal reverberations. This theoretical approach is especially pertinent when analysing violence in Mexico's contemporary conflicts, as it illustrates how emotions such as fear are weaponised to impede mobilisation and sustain subjugation. By outlining the specific structural and emotional forms of violence affecting women in Mexico, this work supports the feminist aim of positioning resistance and agency within their violent environments. It demonstrates that, for Mexican women, resistance is a deliberate choice that overcomes fear through expressions of care and the pursuit of solidarity and community. In this way, this research enhances the feminist critique of the Mexican state's 'security' measures, especially military-based solutions (García, 2025), that undermine gender equality and increase feelings of insecurity. Instead, it advocates for a human-centred perspective, rooted in collective care, that redefines what it means to create safety and justice for everyone.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Section 1.1.1. Contemporary Definitions and Theories on Violence

The World Health Organisation (WHO) described violence as: 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of causing injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation'. This definition includes interpersonal, self-directed, and collective violence (Armenta, 2023). In this section, I will emphasise key theorists whose work has shaped our understanding of what constitutes violence today, expanding beyond the traditional focus on physical acts of violence (e.g., war, assault) to encompass structural, political, global, and cultural dimensions.

Walter Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence' (1921) examines the relationship between violence and law. In his conception of this relationship, Benjamin states: 'Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end-making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking' (p. 295). Benjamin differentiates between mythic violence, used to create and uphold law, and divine violence, which transcends and destroys law. Mythic violence, linked to authority, is employed by institutions such as the military and police to maintain social order. Conversely, divine violence signifies a form of violence that breaks free from the legal system, offering a radical alternative to the law's inherent violence. Benjamin's critique questions the notion that law is inherently just, suggesting instead that legal systems are grounded in historical violence (e.g., conquests, revolutions, colonialism). What Benjamin's 'critique of violence' contests is not violence itself, but law, insofar as it is fundamentally linked to violence (Milisavljevic, 2012). In this context, given the conditions in which humans live, they must resort to violence in their attempts to achieve justice, and only through power can justice be realised (Guzmán, 2014).

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) is a pioneering work that examines the psychological and political impacts of colonialism on the colonised and the colonisers. He investigates how colonisation dehumanises the oppressed, stripping them of identity and subjecting them to violence and exploitation. Through his opening line, 'decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon' (p.1), he contends that violence is an essential tool for the colonised to reclaim their dignity and agency, as it provides a means to overthrow colonial rule and build a new national identity.

As B. J. Jha (1988) clarifies, Fanon employs the term violence in multiple contexts. Firstly, he refers to the colonial regime being created and maintained through violence. Secondly, he uses it interchangeably with force. Thirdly, it signifies radicalism, coercion, and militancy. In this regard, Fanon's concept of violence is vague and 'encompasses almost the entire range of political pressure' (Zolberg, 1966, p. 62).

In 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research' (1969), Johan Galtung introduces the 'Violence Triangle,' identifying three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence is the most visible, while structural violence, a term coined by Galtung, is an unseen force created by societal structures that hinder the fulfilment of basic needs. Cultural violence comprises beliefs and ideologies that justify and legitimise both direct and structural violence. These forms of violence are interconnected and often reinforce societal injustices. Galtung contends that peace is achieved when all three forms of violence are absent. His framework has significantly influenced feminist theory, emphasising how GBV is rooted in heteropatriarchal ideologies. However, some feminist critiques (e.g., Confortini, 2006) argue that Galtung's theory overlooks how gender roles sustain inequality at all levels. Critics such as David Held (1995) claim that emphasising structural and cultural violence can obscure individual responsibility, while Arundhati Roy (2004) suggests that Galtung's approach may reflect Western norms of violence and peace. In her work 'War is Peace,' Roy critiques global power dynamics surrounding war, peace, and authority, focusing on how Western nations, particularly the United States, utilise the concept of peace to justify violence and imperialism. She argues that Galtung's methodology might overlook the complex, exploitative role of Western powers in global conflicts and the deeper, systemic injustices that uphold these structures.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari examine violence in relation to social structures, power, and desire. By identifying trends of territorialisation and deterritorialisation in relationships, they contend that power operates in multiple, interconnected ways across personal, collective, and institutional levels. Furthermore, echoing Benjamin's view that the state relies on violence, they affirm: 'State policing or lawful violence consists in capturing while simultaneously constituting a right to capture.' (p.448). They outline four 'regimes of violence' – the 'ritual' violence of so-called primitive societies, war (which belongs to the state by definition), crime, and state violence, whose model is police violence (p.

448). But, as Vladimir Milisavljevic (2012) points out, no type of violence could qualify as revolutionary. Their concept of the 'rhizomatic' spread of violence alludes to the idea that violence is imminent, operating through decentralised networks of power. However, critics like Chantal Mouffe (1992) argue this conception blurs the line between power and violence, making it difficult to pinpoint how violence can be addressed (e.g., physical violence, state violence, cultural violence).

Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower and biopolitics, introduced primarily in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978), argue that state violence operates not only through overt repression but also through subtle forms of control, such as surveillance, regulation of bodies, and the normalisation of certain behaviours. His concept of biopolitics can be understood as a political rationality centred on the administration of life and populations: 'to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order' (Foucault, 1978). His work shifted the focus from sovereign power (the right to kill or let live) to the mechanisms through which power is exercised via disciplinary societies and the regulation of bodies, social norms, and reproductive policies. As Nikolas Rose (2001) notes, while biopower explains the control mechanisms in modern societies, it often fails to account for the specificities of different political regimes and the actual struggles faced by individuals under various forms of state control.

Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2003) explores the relationship between sovereignty, power, and death in contemporary global politics. In his re-theorisation of Foucault's biopolitics through a necro (death) lens, Mbembe argues that modern forms of power are increasingly defined by the ability to decide who lives and who dies – what he terms as 'necropolitics' (Mbembe, 2003). The concept addresses how entire classes, peoples, and lives are deemed 'surplus' to the requirements of increasingly inhospitable social formations and can be exploited and eliminated 'naturally' (p. 58). This is a form of power that goes beyond traditional state control over life, focusing instead on how certain populations are exposed to death and suffering through mechanisms like war, colonialism, and systemic inequality. Mbembe argues that colonial practices and war are renewed in contemporary democracy, producing a world where rights are permanently suspended; enemies are closely controlled, separated, and exterminated, and continuous mobility is necessary for survival. His theoretical framework has been widely critiqued by feminist and queer scholars, who argue that gender is an under-theorised element of

Mbembe's account of necropolitics, as it takes a secondary role while accounting for racial and (post)colonial violence. Nonetheless, his theory still provides a useful tool for analysing gendered violence, and specifically gendered death (Islekel, 2022).

Section 1.1.2. Global Feminist Theories on Violence

Feminist theories of GBV focus on analysing the structures and systems that sustain it, recognising its political nature (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020). GBV originates from hegemonic social values that naturalise gender inequalities, granting men greater power in relationships and often justifying women's oppression (Costa et al., 2017). The UN defines GBV as harmful acts based on gender, rooted in inequality, abuse of power, and harmful norms (UNIFEM 1999). Françoise Vergés (2022) argues that focusing on individual 'violent men' rather than the structural systems enabling violence reinforces patriarchy and capitalism. Moreover, feminist analysis highlights understanding GBV from the perspective of those experiencing it, revealing control and destructive effects beyond physical harm and showing how societal structures normalise GBV over time.

Feminist theories on violence build upon Galtung's (1975) theory of structural violence, describing heteropatriarchal domination of men and women. Brownmiller (1975) and MacKinnon (1989) reframe rape as a societal issue rooted in patriarchal power structures rather than an isolated criminal act motivated solely by sexual desire. In doing so, they emphasise the state's role in maintaining women's subordination. Rita Segato (2003) and Vergès (2022) advocate viewing sexual violence as both a tool for gender-based control and part of broader social and economic oppression. True (2012) adds that VAW originates from processes not solely structural or institutional but also rooted in capitalism and militarism.

Radford and Russell's anthology *Femicide: The Politics of Killing Women* (1992), politicises VAW, defining 'femicide' as 'the misogynistic killing of women by men' in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society (Radford & Russell, 1992, p. 3). They argue that naming femicide is a political act of resistance, exposing such killings as systemic rather than isolated. Dorlin supports this view, describing femicide as 'the ultimate expression of a continuum of power which begins with the pervasiveness of social and economic inequalities, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and the sexist representation that structures the social imagination and public space' (2019). Scholars (Corradi et al., 2016) recognise the

importance of naming femicide for raising awareness and influencing research and policy, though Frazer and Hutchings (2020) caution against essentialising and privileging women's experiences as a singular category.

In addition to gender, violence impacts women differently depending on their ethnicity, class, and nation, among other factors (Hyndman & Alwis, 2003). Black feminists critique mainstream approaches to sexual violence for overlooking the historical and racial aspects of rape, noting how women of colour have been specifically targeted by systemic sexual violence. Crenshaw's intersectionality (1991) underscores how multiple social identities and systems of oppression intersect to produce unique experiences of marginalisation. Although the term had not yet been coined, the early work by hooks (1981), Davis (1983), and Collins (1990) challenges middle-class, white-centric feminism, calling for new subjectivities and political shifts (Sandoval, 2000). Vergès (2022) stresses an intersectional approach for Queer, Muslim, and Indigenous feminists, examining the broader conditions in which GBV occurs.

Feminist geographers criticise studies defining violence, especially VAW, primarily as individual and physical. They emphasise its political roots and the importance of everyday, often unnoticed actions. Mardorossian (2002) highlights how this expanded view raises public awareness. In her article 'Intimate War', Pain argues that 'military violence is also intimate; domestic violence is also political' (2015), highlighting how the violence we see as private and personal is a direct consequence of gender power dynamics reinforced by state mechanisms. She views domestic, private, and global spaces from an embodied perspective as part of a 'single complex of violence' (2015). Sjoberg (2014) considers the emotional impact of violence and examines 'what it means to live' in relation to the potential for violence on women's bodies. Jokela-Pansini's (2020) research suggests that women's perceptions of violence are influenced more by systemic and structural violence than by actual attacks, embedding fear and insecurity in women's everyday lives. However, some feminists argue that if too many actions are classified as violence, it becomes neither analytically nor politically useful (Frazer and Hutchings, 2020).

Reflecting on feminist theories and perspectives on women's experiences of violence will enhance my understanding of how women portray their experiences, especially those that have been normalised and rendered invisible. It also guided my

analysis of the films, showing how emotions and embodiment convey lived experiences of GBV.

Section 1.1.3. Feminist Theories on Violence in Latin America

Tracing the historical roots of violence is crucial to Latin American feminist thought, linking contemporary forms of GBV, such as femicide, to colonial practices of domination. Far from private or individual acts, this form of violence reflects the hierarchical, binary systems imposed by colonialism. María Lugones, in *The Coloniality of Gender* (2016), argues that colonialism marked bodies and assigned social roles differently for the colonised and the colonisers. Segato (2014, 2016) recognises that the state is the ultimate, concrete realisation of patriarchy, where the 'minoritisation' of female and feminised bodies is fundamental to domination, making gender violence a routine exercise of power. Ochy Curiel (2016) highlights how sexual violence, as a colonial tool of oppression, introduced institutionalised forms of violence that persist in modern societies. This aligns with Aníbal Quijano's 'Coloniality of Power' (2000), which links colonial legacies to contemporary social discrimination. Scholars have referred to Liz Kelly's concept of the 'continuum of violence' (1987) to explain the legacy of colonialism in Latin American societies. Segato (2016) describes a 'pedagogy of cruelty' which explains how the shift from reciprocity, duality and community to the age of capital, extraction and growth has depended on reducing human empathy and normalising violent practices (2016), specifically those inflicted upon the most marginalised bodies.

Femicide persists across Latin America despite legal advances (Souza, 2019), underlining the need to examine it within heteropatriarchal capitalist societies. Marcela Lagarde (1996) describes femicide as the culmination of systemic VAW, while the term 'feminicidio/feminicide' (instead of femicidio), often used in Latin America, reflects state complicity in these crimes (Corradi et al., 2016). Segato (2003) asserts, 'Femicide is not just an act of violence against a woman; it is a message to all women. It demonstrates what can happen to those who dare to transgress or resist heteropatriarchal control,' later proposing 'femigenocide' to frame femicide as a crime of war (2014). Many scholars support defining femicide as

genocide (Atencia, 2015; Hernández, 2015; Russel et al., 2013), although Schröttle[6] cautions that genocide traditionally involves racial, ethnic, or religious persecution. Recent studies (Wright, 2011; Rodríguez Aguilera, 2017; Valencia, 2019) apply Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics – the power to determine who lives and dies (2003) – to femicide, highlighting its gendered dimensions, particularly in Latin America[7].

Cecília Palmeiro (2017) observes that femicides are the beginning of a broader system of violence affecting women (2017). Silvia Federici's work, although not exclusive to Latin America, is crucial for analysing the impact of neoliberal capitalism on women, especially in extractive economies. She argues that late twentieth-century structural adjustment policies pushed women into informal labour markets, increasing their vulnerability to violence (2019). Gargallo (2004) observes that during this period, many women took on precarious jobs, such as factory and agricultural work, with little protection or fair wages. Veronica Gago (2020) criticises neoliberalism for intensifying VAW by worsening inequality, fostering economic insecurity, and diminishing community networks. She emphasises how debt dependency and precarious labour normalise everyday violence, reinforcing systemic oppression.

These approaches align with Segato's view that VAW cannot be addressed solely through identity politics (2016) or state intervention. Feminist scholars emphasise care as a critical response to GBV, suggesting how it can be harnessed to overcome barriers to action (Zulver, 2024) and challenge neoliberal policies, which rely on profit and production (De la Bellacasa, 2012; Lawson, 2007; Robinson, 2013; Zulver, 2024). Latin American feminists adopt intersectional resistance strategies, challenging the homogeneity of Western feminism. For Lugones, the concept of coalition is vital to the decolonial feminist project, as it requires us to reconsider the power structures built on division and conquest (2003). Julieta Paredes (2008) develops *feminismo comunitario*, focusing on collective liberation and community. Gago (2020) argues that framing gender violence as a war against bodies enables us to connect the diverse experiences of violence, each embodied and unique, through a shared questioning of their underlying structures. Souza (2019) argues that

[6] Oral presentation at the Second Annual Conference on Femicide Across Europe, COST ACTION IS-1206, University of Zaragoza, 18-20 March 2015; comments made on Russel's lecture entitled 'International mass femicide: The most extreme form of genocide'.
7 Refer to Chapter Two Structures of Violence for Mexican context and Valencia's theory of 'gore capitalism'.

intersectional, anti-capitalist resistance can redefine women's roles in politics, while Sayak Valencia (2019) introduces the idea of 'transfeminism' as transnational, non-identitarian networks of care and survival within a necro-liberal context.

This project draws upon these frameworks, situating GBV in Latin America as part of an interconnected and historical system of oppression, not as isolated or individual. This perspective will guide my analysis of the films' representations of women's experiences of violence, ensuring they are explored as strategies for resistance against heteropatriarchal, colonial and capitalist structures as opposed to re-victimising women within them.

Section 1.1.4. Feminist Theories on Violence in Mexico

In this section, I will review key theories relating to GBV in Mexico. These theories underscore the specificity of its causes and how they have become deeply embedded within the country's cultural, political, and economic frameworks. Contextualising GBV in Mexico is imperative for facilitating a critical analysis of the films in my project and for demonstrating how they consider its root causes, as opposed to reproducing sensationalised and reductive narratives that are detached from all accountabilities.

Machismo, defined as male dominance over women (Perilla, 1999), is widely seen as a key factor in GBV in Mexico (de la Morena, 2020; Ruelas, 2021). Scholars trace its origins to Spanish colonisation, which imposed White supremacist, heteronormative patriarchy on Indigenous societies (hooks, 2004). Segato and Monque (2021) suggest that colonialism worsened inequality by dismantling dual-gender systems. The compensatory model argues that during colonisation, both Indigenous and African men suffered significant losses due to racism, oppression, and enslavement (Hardin, 2002; Adames & Chaves-Dueñas, 2016; Mirandé, 2018). This collective loss of power and agency purportedly led to the negative behaviours associated with machismo in Latino men today, to retain power over those they could control: their families (Rodriguez, 1999). Though machismo originated in Mexican contexts, Western portrayals have generalised it across all Latino men (Peñaloso, 1968; Torres et al., 2022). Many definitions of machismo overlook self-conceptualisation and practices that existed before the violent colonisation of the Americas (Gutmann, 1996; Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2016; Hardin, 2002; Morales, 1996). While machismo influences social norms, scholars warn against attributing

Mexico's high femicide rates solely to cultural factors, as this narrows the analysis and confines it to private and domestic violence (Kloppe Santa-María, 2023). Instead, as Ruelas (2021) highlights, understanding gendered violence necessitates examining its deep-rooted social conditioning.

Although growing evidence shows historical forms of femicides (Kloppe-Santamaría, 2021), the issue gained prominence in Latin American feminist discourse following the wave of femicides in Ciudad Juárez in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The city remains one of the deadliest places for women globally (Shaw, 2017), symbolising broader issues of gender, exploitation, and marginalisation in neoliberal Mexico. Femicide rates are linked to economic cycles; the United States' North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the rise of transnational maquiladoras in the 1990s under the new neoliberal economic programme implemented by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which attracted young women seeking work (Ugalde, 2023). As neoliberal policies emphasised women's economic independence, their growing visibility in the workforce disrupted traditional gender roles (Ugalde, 2023). Consequently, young, poor, Brown women became targets of extreme violence, with their bodies subjected to sexual torture and publicly displayed to further instil terror (Valencia & Zhuravleva, 2019). Furthermore, the maquiladora industry reinforced women's disposability, portraying them as cheap labour and increasing their vulnerability. Arriola (2010) discusses how 'the ideal maquiladora worker was a hybrid of stereotypes based on sex, race, and class – she was not only more docile and passive than Mexican men, but submissive, easily trainable, and unlikely to pose problems with union organising' (Arriola, 2010, 31).

As Chante and Craske argue (2007: 293-294), changes to the market economy, which have undermined the capacity of men to fulfil their duties as 'family providers', have incubated a perceptible crisis in 'masculine identity'. Volk and Schlotterbeck (2010), like Segato (2021), link this societal and economic shift to the intensification of gendered violence. At the same time, Monsiváis (2013) contends that the maquiladora industry disrupted deeply ingrained notions of Mexican identity rooted in heteropatriarchal and colonial structures. Femicide in Juárez, therefore, is not an aberration but a mechanism of heteropatriarchal control – an extreme assertion of dominance aimed at reestablishing male authority over women's bodies (Botello & Valdes Figueroa, 2010). The geographic realities of Juárez intensify these dangers, as maquiladora workers often must traverse vast,

unpatrolled areas with no safe public transport, leaving them particularly vulnerable. As Davies notes, sites of femicide have become territories of stigma, where poverty, the transgression of gender roles, and criminality are interwoven to justify a 'politics of indifference' (2019: 13) Authorities have been condemned for impunity, misinformation, and refusal to classify these murders as femicides (Shaw, 2017), further manipulating public opinion against the victims (Ugalde, 2023) and reinforcing heteropatriarchal structures that sustain violence (González Rodríguez, 2012). Moreover, women seeking justice often encounter delays, lack forensic support, and face victim-blaming, which further hinders investigations (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, 2012).

In their study on systemic VAW amidst armed conflict and militarisation in Mexico, Herrera, Villaseñor, and Aguilar (2024) describe how conditions of inequality and violence, which have long oppressed women, are worsening due to the increasing militarisation of public politics and escalating armed violence. They highlight that in armed conflicts and subsequent militarisation, sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. In this context, women are sexually tortured not only to inflict physical pain but also to send a message of power onto the social body. Kloppe Santa-María (2023) observes that gender violence is becoming more closely linked to criminal and state violence, suffering adverse effects from the country's growing militarisation of civilian forces. Likewise, Adams (2023) correlates the rise in GBV with declining perceptions of security. Philipson and True (2024) propose that militarisation might temporarily reduce intimate partner violence (IPV), but caution that 'militarised masculinities' perpetuate normalised VAW, representing an often-overlooked threat.

Margara Millán (2022) connects studies of GBV in Mexico with Galtung's triangle of violence. She notes that the disappearances of women in Mexico are incorporated within this triangle. The Mexican government admits there are over 115,000 disappeared or missing persons in the country – a figure that increases daily. Scholars suggest that the phenomenon is also linked to organised crime activities and the involvement, support, or acquiescence of state actors in these criminal acts. According to Payne and Ansolabeher, four reasons explain the persistence of disappearances in a post-transitional state like Mexico: its clandestine nature; the construction of a 'disposable' person; its political economy utility; and an ambiguous loss of social control. Kloppe-Santamaría (2023) highlights that the phenomenon of

disappearances has a distinct gendered dimension that remains understudied and underexplored. She also notes that women often search for their disappeared loved ones and are particularly vulnerable, facing harassment, retaliation, and even death because of their activism. Zulver (2024) notes how these women, called *madres buscadoras,* live in conditions of 'multisited violence' (Menjívar, 2011): a 'potent combination of structural, symbolic, political, gender and gendered, and everyday forms of violence' (Walsh & Menjívar, 2016: 586). Segato (2014) and Valencia (2018) provide key theoretical frameworks for understanding the cultural politics of narco-capitalism in Mexico, and its relation to the rise in GBV, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two, Structures of Violence.

Section 1.2.1. Representations of Violence in the Media

In this section, I examine key theories concerning the representation of violence in the media. Many scholars have investigated the role of new media technologies, exploring how they shape human perception, culture, and society. McLuhan's 'Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man' (1964) argues that it is the nature of the medium itself, rather than the content, that deeply influences society. He emphasises that technology changes how humans experience the world, often subliminally, stating that: 'the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinion, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance.' (p. 18). Critics like Bourdieu (1979), Baudrillard (1979) and Schiller (1989) challenge McLuhan's approach, highlighting his neglect of social context, power structures and corporate influence. They argue that media forms embed ideologies and reinforce political systems, shaping how violence is portrayed and understood.

Sharing similar views with Bourdieu and Baudrillard, Chomsky and Hermann's 'Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media' (1988) critically examines how mass media operate in democratic societies, arguing that it functions as a 'propaganda machine' that shapes public opinion to serve elite interests rather than providing objective information. Much like Schiller (1989), they highlight how the media acts as a vital link between the state and the public, framing issues to support dominant power structures. Furthermore, they emphasise the economic influences on media outlets, contending that they prioritise the interests of their corporate owners and advertisers over impartial journalism. Baudrillard

develops this theme further in his later work, The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1995), using the Gulf War to demonstrate how conflicts are manipulated as media spectacles and dominated by Western perspectives. He asserts that 'war is conducted like a media and advertising campaign, with the goal not of fighting but of gaining public consent through deterrence' (p. 25).

In *Violence and the Media* (2003), Carter and Weaver categorise research on representations of violence in the media and its effects into four key areas. 'Behavioural effects theory' suggests exposure to violent media influences viewers, teaching them to perceive violence as acceptable (Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wilson, 1998). 'Desensitisation theory' proposes that consuming a constant diet of violence through media can 'undermine feelings of concern, empathy, or sympathy viewers might have towards victims of actual violence' (Wilson et al. 1998, p. 22). George Gerbner's 'cultivation theory', introduced in the 1960s as part of the Cultural Indicators Project[1], examines the long-term effects of television on viewers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182). The cultivation analysis approach does not assume media violence causes social violence. Instead, researchers argue that media representations of violence constitute a means of social control in that they 'vividly dramatise the preferred power relations and cultivate fear, dependence on authority, and the desire for security rather than social change.' (White 1983, p. 287). For Gerbner and Gross (1976, p. 182), television violence is the 'simplest and cheapest dramatic means available to demonstrate the rules of the power game.' Lastly, many critics refute claims that representations of violence in the media directly impact behaviour, whether positively or negatively. For example. In their work *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* (1997), researchers Martin Barker and Julian Petley argue that this belief oversimplifies a complex issue by focusing on the media as a scapegoat rather than addressing broader societal and cultural factors.

Similarly, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) explores the ethics and politics of visual representations of violence, arguing that visual media often limit a deeper understanding of historical and social contexts. She considers the dynamics between those viewing violence and those experiencing pain, suggesting that photographs of suffering can provoke empathy but can also desensitise viewers, commodify pain or reinforce voyeurism. Furthermore, she critiques the desensitisation that occurs when exposure to violent imagery becomes

routine. She argues that, as a result, viewers 'remember only the photographs' (p. 89) of suffering, not the conditions that created them. Sontag differentiates between suffering and living with the photographed images of suffering, arguing that media coverage trivialises suffering, reducing it to fleeting moments of sensationalism rather than sustained engagement.

Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) expands on this, asserting that media and political discourse shape perceptions of violence. For example, Western media often portrays victims of war in the global south as distant or 'other', reinforcing unequal valuations of life. In this sense, she critiques how media framing shapes public perception and prioritises certain lives over others: 'The media frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured are themselves operations of power.' (p. 63). Zelizer (2010) also critiques the media's use of 'about to die' images, questioning whether they inform the public or exploit human suffering for sensationalism. These reflections resonate with the work of Zygmunt Bauman and his project 'Disposable Life' (2014), where he asks: are there aspects of contemporary global society that make it possible to think and act in ways that render specific populations disposable? How might we commemorate these tragic events in ways that will cultivate a deeper understanding of the conditions that gave rise to extreme violence? How might we forge a truly trans-disciplinary pedagogy that connects the arts, humanities and social sciences such that we may engage more critically with the meaning of violence and the disposability of populations in the 21st century?

Rob Nixon further explores the difficulties of representing violence in the media in his work *Slow Violence* (2011). Nixon defines *slow violence* as violence that 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.' (p. 2). Examples include climate change, toxic pollution and desertification. He critiques modern media for favouring immediate crises over slow, systematic threats: 'we live in an era that privileges the spectacular, the instantly visible, and the sensationally timed, which makes the imperceptible tempos of slow violence a calamitous fit for attention spans' (p. 14), calling on writers and artists to render such imperceptible violence visible (p. 15). Feminist scholars, however, critique Nixon for overlooking how gendered and raced epistemologies shape the experience of gradual, often invisible harm (Christian & Dowler, 2019).

Section 1.2.2. Representations of Gendered Violence in the Mass Media

Lagarde y de los Rios (2005) recognises that femicides and GBV are produced by cultural patterns, ideologies, and practices discriminating against all those who identify as women and non-binary. These are perpetuated through private and public discourses, such as political, legal, and media platforms (Lazar, 2005). Feminist studies have long examined the media's role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and GBV (Mattleart, 2003-2004). Paraphrasing Aldrete (2024), the media is an ideal tool for instilling heteropatriarchal ideologies and shaping individual beliefs, due to the discursive power of news reports and stories. Research confirms that media coverage mirrors societal constructions and ambivalence toward VAW (Morgan & Politoff, 2012) ofter displaying omission of social context, sensationalism, misrepresentation, victim blaming, and the erasure of victims' voices (Sutherland, McCormack, Easteal, Holland & Pirkis, 2016). Mediated representations influence audience responses (Carlyle, Orr, Savage & Babin, 2024), often provoking shock rather than empathy and reinforcing Otherness, fear, and subordination (affecting attitudes towards accepting or justifying GBV at societal and individual levels (Hunnicut, 2009; Lagos Lira & Toledo, 2014; Carranco, 2020).

Media systems differ across regions, shaping narratives and societal perceptions (Waisbord, 2000; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). For instance, while European media often avoids fictional narrative techniques such as music, close-ups, reiteration, and melodrama, scholars note that Latin American mainstream media frequently employ them, leading to more sensationalist portrayals of violence (Navitski, 2017; Ignacio Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 2010; Berlanga Gayón, 2015). In his work *Public Spectacles of Violence* (2017), Navitski argues that, particularly in early twentieth-century Brazil and Mexico, media spectacles of violence influenced by imported films helped audiences make sense of political instability, high crime rates, and social inequality associated with modernisation. He suggests that the legacy of sensational visual culture persists in Mexico and Brazil today, where public displays of violence by the military police and organised crime are highly visible both in the public space and the media.

In Mexico, femicide gained international media attention in the late 1980s and 1990s, when numerous women were murdered in Ciudad Juárez (Aldrete, 2020). With the justice system failing victims, the media became a key platform for contesting criminal issues and shaping public opinion, especially in Ciudad Juárez

(Domínguez-Ruvalcaba & Corona, 2010). However, despite growing research on femicides in Ciudad Juárez, their portrayal in the media has received limited attention (García-Del Moral 2011). One of the initial studies on coverage of femicide in Mexican newspapers exposed the use of information as spectacle (Buitron, 1997). García-Del Moral states that a prominent feature of these reports is the use of explicit photographs, often depicting discarded, bloodstained clothing or women's bodies partly buried in the desert. She views these photographs as reinforcing the idea that these women were waste belonging to a space of violence, while also inviting a heteropatriarchal gaze that normalises violence (2011). Berlanga Gayón (2015) observes that such images do not depict reality but are constructed through what she calls *encuadres del patriarcado* ('patriarchal framing'), which reproduces gender inequalities. She suggests that these representations function as a *pedagodía de miedo* ('pedagogy of fear') aimed at women and society, conveying that those who transgress norms are at risk.

The media frequently reproduces victim-blaming narratives present within the existing criminal justice system (García Guevara & Guchambosa Paredes, 2019). Studies on Latin American media reveal victim-blaming structures based on a lack of self-care, such as 'they were going to parties' (Fernández Lopez, 2017) or 'they accepted help from an unknown man' (BardWigdor & Bonavitta, 2017). Marisol Alcocer (2014) notes that characterising victims as sex workers or dancers often frames them as more vulnerable, which, as Aldrete (2020) argues, normalises violence. In general, women perceived as sexually transgressive are viewed as less human and therefore considered more deserving of violence. Additionally, Latina/Black women are more likely to be portrayed as immoral and risk-takers, with their victimisation explained as an unavoidable outcome of their unsafe environment (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). In cases linked to maquiladoras, women are portrayed as victims of a failing infrastructure (García-Del Moral, 2011), yet also as 'replaceable and anonymous bodies' (Walker, 2005, p. 101). Car and Ravbar (2021) emphasise that secondary victimisation occurs whenever the victim's actions are further scrutinised in the media and what they did to 'provoke' the perpetrator.

News reports often justify or mitigate perpetrators' responsibility by emphasising reasons for their actions (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Aldrete, 2024). These narratives frequently depict men as victims, attributing their violence to provocation (Taylor, 2009) or framing intimate partner violence as a natural response tied to

male honour (McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Nader, 2014; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). Responsibility is further blurred by citing external factors like alcoholism, stress, or psychological issues, which can produce sympathy among audiences (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; McManus & Dorfman, 2003; Taylor, 2009). These frames maintain a critical disconnection between femicides, presented as isolated, individual cases, and domestic violence as a broader social problem (Gillespie et al, 2013). Additionally, victims' voices are often silenced or misrepresented (Angelico, 2014). Tiscareño-García et al. (2022) found that male journalists in the Mexican press (who are the preferred source) reinforce hegemonic narratives, while female journalists provide more critical perspectives on femicide.

Different forms of GBV have been shown and justified in cinematic productions (Herrera Sánchez, 2016). In Mexico, the sub-genre of narco film exemplifies this. As Gutiérrez Flores argues, the dominant themes in the Mexican film industry serve as a propagandistic apparatus for a rhetoric surrounding violence that ignores the systemic causes – that is, the state itself – in favour of a position that is, at the very least, individualistic, if not outright militaristic and police-oriented (2024). Furthermore, much like mass media portrayals, narco films often spectacularise death and violence, reappropriating the excessive and gory nature of narco violence as a narrative tool, which raises many ethical questions.

This research underscores how the media is a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and for perpetuating dominant narratives surrounding GBV. This is especially pertinent in Mexico and other Latin American countries, where there has been a greater reliance on media systems to disseminate such stories, further bolstering their influential power. As such, it becomes imperative to seek out alternative media representations of GBV, which foster accountability and aim to re-humanise and re-politicise the voices of those left out of mainstream representations.

Section 1.2.3. Feminist Film Theory

This section examines key feminist film theories, in particular, their role in shaping and redefining the notion of 'women's cinema'. The emergence of feminist film theory was driven by second-wave feminism and the rise of women's studies within the academy (Gurkan & Ozan, 2015). Foundational works such as Claire Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' (1973) and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) critiqued the heteropatriarchal ideologies

embedded in mainstream cinema. Johnston's essay argues that women's cinema should not merely aim for inclusion within the existing heteropatriarchal frameworks of mainstream cinema. Instead, it should act as a counter-cinema and actively challenge and deconstruct these dominant filmic conventions. Mulvey uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to interrogate such heteropatriarchal frameworks, highlighting how Hollywood cinema reinforced male dominance via the 'male gaze', objectifying and reducing women to passive roles within narratives.

E. Ann Kaplan's early work, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (1983), expanded on Mulvey's ideas, demonstrating how psychoanalysis and semiology could deconstruct heteropatriarchal culture in dominant representations. Kaplan emphasised how these tools reveal the 'psychic and mythic forces inherent in patriarchy and account for the female positions as we have internalised them' (p. 3). More recently, Mulvey (2015) suggested that in the 1970s, film critics like herself, some of whom were also filmmakers, developed their ideas guided by the need to create a new, emancipatory aesthetic for cinema. Psychoanalytical film theory introduced concepts such as voyeurism and fetishism, which have been pivotal to feminist film by highlighting the spectator's role in the cinematic experience (Holmlund, 1985). However, the work of these theorists has also faced criticism. Freeland (1998) noted the male-centric assumptions of the spectator, while Shohat (1996) critiques their reliance on ahistorical and universal categories, ignoring diverse women's experiences, agendas and political visions. Kaplan's later work (2004) acknowledged these limitations, including the early field's focus on white, Western, heterosexual women and its Eurocentric bias. Despite these critiques, Kaplan argues for the continued relevance of psychoanalytic perspectives, given the persistence of male dominance and racism in society.

Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* explores how femininity and masculinity are constructed and inscribed in cinema and society. Like Mulvey and Kaplan, de Lauretis distinguishes between 'woman' as a 'fictional construct' (p. 5) and 'women' as real individuals shaped by history. Furthermore, she notes that the term 'women's cinema' can refer to films that are made by women and to a Hollywood product designed to appeal to a specifically female audience (p. 27). The distinction between 'woman' and 'women' highlights the gap between theoretical constructs and lived experiences. This was a pivotal advancement in feminist film studies. Unlike Mulvey and Kaplan's psychoanalytic focus, de Lauretis emphasises

'experience', arguing for a shift from analysing the artist, gaze, or text to understanding cinema as a social technology that affects representations and consumption.

Judith Mayne's *The Women and the Keyhole: Feminist and Women's Cinema* (1981) alludes to an understanding of cinema as social technology, as she critiques the limited roles women have held in cinema, noting their prominence as performers but marginalisation as spectators and filmmakers. She praises women directors who subvert the voyeuristic gaze and call attention to the spectacle of cinema. Mayne also critiques the fetishisation of authorship, particularly the overemphasis on male directors, and advocates for a broader definition of 'production' to include influences other than the director (p. 10). Similarly, Laura Shrage (1990) critiques the universalising tendencies of psychoanalytic approaches, which often depict audiences as passive. She calls for a contextual approach that accounts for the diversity in viewers' cinematic habits, emphasising audience variation over a reductive psychological model.

In her book *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (2015), Patricia White highlights how multicultural, postcolonial, and transnational feminist theories have reshaped media studies by addressing questions of power, relationality, and intersectionality. Black feminist thinkers, such as bell hooks, have emphasised how intersections of race, gender, and class influence audience experiences. According to hooks, 'mainstream feminist film criticism in no way acknowledges black female spectatorship. It does not even consider the possibility that women can construct an oppositional gaze via an understanding and awareness of the politics of race and racism' (hooks, 1996, p. 264). In postcolonial film theory, Ella Shohat's 'Gender and the Culture of the Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema' (1994) underscores how Western cinema has historically perpetuated colonialist and heteropatriarchal ideologies, using metaphors like feminised non-Western lands as objects of domination. Her later work, *Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema* (1997), introduces the concept of 'post-Third-Worldist culture,' which validates anticolonial movements while addressing internal divisions within Third World nations. Shohat also celebrates the rise of women of colour and non-Western filmmakers in the 1990s, challenging the canon of Western feminist film. In *Third World Women's Cinema: If the Subaltern Speaks, Will We Listen?* (1997) Gwendolyn Audrey Foster builds upon Gayatri

Spivak's influential question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1988) and orients it toward the question of whether we, within dominant critical and representational discourses, are truly listening or even capable of listening when the subaltern speaks. Furthermore, she critiques how 'Western feminist frameworks often constrain Third World women filmmakers, emphasising the importance of reclaiming visual agency as a woman of colour in film.'

Reflecting on this, in her work *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (2002), Alison Butler argues that the distinctiveness of women's filmmaking arises not from essentialist notions of gender but from the diverse cultural positions of women in contemporary society. However, regarding the paradigm of women's rights as human rights, White (2015, p. 170) asserts that 'many of the insistent issues of the twenty-first century feminist politics – migrant women's labour, feminicide, rape as a tactic of war, sex trafficking – exceed the boundary of the nation-state'. Reflecting on this, Indigenous scholar Guadalupe Escobar notes how the move beyond the nation-state can operate on a political level as a reflexive strategy that emphasises the role of coloniality in the violation of human rights (Escobar, 2021).

When exploring intersectional approaches to film analysis and production, it is essential to recognise the New Queer Cinema movement, a term introduced by Ruby Rich in *Sight & Sound* magazine (1992). This term describes a movement in queer-themed independent filmmaking in the early 1990s (Casacot, 2023). Heavily influenced by feminism and considerations of global cinema (White, 2013), Ruby Rich's *book, New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (2013), offers a thorough examination of the movement, which she connects to the 1990s AIDS crisis. Rich discusses how these films showcase an uncompromising queer perspective, employ non-linear storytelling, explicit sexuality, and subvert traditional genre conventions to challenge mainstream portrayals of queerness. However, she acknowledges that the new queer films "don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary, strategy or concern" (p. 18). Instead, they're unified by the ways they queer existing narratives, subvert expectations and foreground queerness where it had only been implicit (Moore, 2020).

Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000) shifts focus from narrative identification towards bodily identification, exploring how intercultural and experimental films engage viewers sensorially and emotionally by evoking a sense of touch, memory, and embodiment.

Drawing on the work of nineteenth-century art historian Aloïs Riegl, Marks introduces the concept of 'haptic visuality'. This refers to cinematographic techniques that appeal to audiences through multisensory imagery, creating a more complex spectatorial experience, moving beyond the dominance of the spectator's gaze and the voyeuristic conventions of hegemonic cinema. The idea of 'haptic cinema' has significantly influenced discussions on women's cinema and its subjective implications for the spectator. Marks acknowledges that critiques of ocular-centrism hold a substantial legacy among feminist theorists, who associate vision with bodily attachment, objectification, and control over self and others (2000). Furthermore, she asserts that 'the haptic is a visual strategy that can be used to describe alternative visual traditions, including women's and feminist practices, rather than a feminine quality in particular' (p. 170).

The abovementioned theories underscore the importance of continually challenging and critiquing the concept of 'women's cinema' and reject the notion that there is a 'unified female subject' (Shohat, 1988). Feminist film theorists must instead address the gendered, sexualised, and racialised processes and modes of representation as historically and culturally specific while also being inclusive of LGBTQI+ perspectives, which remain subject to discrimination. These insights will form a crucial framework for my film analysis, enabling me to critically evaluate heteropatriarchal ideologies and cinematic conventions while situating my work within a diverse and intersectional lens.

Section 1.2.4. Feminist Film Theory in Latin America and Mexico

This section explores key feminist film theories in Latin America, with a focus on Mexico. New Latin American Cinema emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a cultural movement opposing Hollywood's dominance and serving as a vital cultural front in struggles against underdevelopment, economic and cultural dependency, and social injustice (Rich in Martin and Shaw, 2017, pp. 6-7). Moreover, Third Cinema, a revolutionary film movement originating in Latin America in the late 1960s, sought to adopt this ethos. While many films of the era were produced collectively[8], the prominence of an auteurist framework meant the focus often

[8] New Latin American Cinema was shaped by filmmakers' collective resistance to US cultural and political imperialism during the Cold War, aiming to radically alter history (Cervera, Kerfa & Ramírez-Soto)

remained on the (male) director, obscuring women's contributions (Ferrer, 2020) and making gender and sexual minority issues less of a priority (Ponzanesi, 2013). Female filmmakers were widely underrepresented, despite their shared interest in resisting 'the Hollywood imperialist mode of filmmaking' (Wilson & Garavelli, 2021). Nonetheless, as Rich observes in her seminal essay 'An/Other View of New Latin American Cinema' (Rich, 1997), the transition from themes of 'exteriority' to 'interiority,' which characterised early films of this period, introduced more implicitly political, personal and everyday topics into more overtly political subject matters. This shift, she notes, created opportunities for women filmmakers to engage with the medium. Furthermore, Rich highlights that women filmmakers of the era represented a different approach to filmmaking that signalled a later turn in Latin American cinema towards the politics of affect and intimacy (Barraza & Rueda, 2024).

Fuelled by the 1970s women's movement, several feminist film collectives emerged in Latin America, such as *Cine Mujer* in Mexico (1975-1987) and in Colombia (1978-late 1990s), that used cinema to raise awareness of women's issues, intervene in political matters, and challenge hegemonic representations of women in Latin American mainstream media (Rodríguez, 2019). Martin (2012) suggests that some aspects of *Cine Mujer*'s (Colombia) productions, such as its 'modernist belief in agency, preoccupations with oppressed groups, and strong belief in women's power to affect change and mobilise', were inspired by both New Latin American Cinema and second-wave feminism (Ferrer, 2020). These collectives 'favoured a collaborative rather than individual mode of authorship' (Jaikumar, 2017) that disrupted the centrality of the director's subjectivity. Using documentaries as a medium for activism*, Cine Mujer* (Mexico) tackled themes shared with second-wave feminists in Europe and North America, including voluntary motherhood (*Cosas de mujeres*, 1975-1978), rape (*Rompiendo el silencio*, 1978) and domestic life (*Vicios en la cocina*, 1979). In doing so, they maintained a creative dialogue with transnational feminist movements. Wilson and Garavelli (2021) highlight the rise of female directors during this era, who focused on making documentaries that examined memory, dictatorship, and autobiography, as well as feature films addressing female and queer experiences. The scholars underscore how documentary filmmaking remains vital for exploring personal and political realms among contemporary Latin American women filmmakers. Patricia Torres San Martín, a pioneer in the study of

filmmaking by women in the region, reflects that in their documentaries, Latin American women have developed 'successive approximations to our reality that allow them to establish a relationship of tension and proximity with the public' (2014).

In *Redirecting the Gaze* (1998), Diana Robin and Ira Jaffe explore how female filmmakers from Latin America sought to move beyond 'totalising, gender-neutral and de-historicised discourses of Third Cinema' (p. 2), striving instead to represent 'local differences and alternative forms of solidarity' (p. 2). This idea of transcending static, essentialist notions of identity aligns with the view presented by Rueda and Barraza in *Female Agency in Films Made by Latin American Women* (2024), which underscores that while women from both the Global North and South share a common experience of exclusion from hegemonic cinematic frameworks, Latin American women contend with additional layers of historical, cultural, and material colonisation by the North. In this sense, their work highlights the struggles of Latin American women filmmakers to navigate gendered notions that originate outside of their contexts, with many not identifying as feminists. In her work, Bernadita Llanos (2024) explores the intersectional oppressions that shape the lives of Latin American women, emphasising the role of filmmaking and storytelling as powerful tools for rethinking how experiences such as displacement, migration, and political conflict shape their identities.

Since the 1990s, there has been a surge in Latin American documentaries (Escobar, 2021) produced by marginalised groups as a form of self-production, driven by advances in digital technologies. Film scholar Julianne Burton (1990) views documentaries as an instrument for 'social and political transformation'. Guadalupe Escobar, in 'Testimonio 50' (2021), highlights the pivotal role of the documentary in Indigenous-women-led environmental groups, describing it as 'a cinema of memory' grounded in grassroots activism. Similarly, in *Resistance and Revival: Indigenous Women Media-Makers in Contemporary Mexico* (2021), Hurtado frames the documentaries she studies[9] as forms of female Indigenous resistance in Mexico, situated within a global movement emphasising indigenous self-determination against (neo)colonialism (Wilson & Garavelli, 2021). She notes that 'female media-makers are guardians of their cultures, promoting the renewal of

[9] *Voladora* (2008) by Chloé Campero, *La Vida de la Mujer en Resistencia* (2004), produced by Chiapas Media Project – Promedios, and *La Rebelión de las Oaxaqueñas* (2008), produced by Mal de Ojo TV

cultural heritage'. These reflections resonate with the ideas of Bolivian subaltern theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2015), who views image-making as a powerful tool that challenges Eurocentric visual regimes and the racialised, hierarchical visual cultures imposed by colonialism. However, as Escobar (2021) cautions, it is vital to consider the ethics of representation and whether documentary filmmakers (depending on their connection with the film) might still reproduce an imperial gaze.

The 'affective turn' in Latin American cinema research, influenced by scholars such as Brian Massumi (1995) and Sara Ahmed (2004/2010)[10], explores how emotions intersect with political struggles like colonialism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism. Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema (1990s-2000s)* and Mabel Moraña's *El lenguaje de las emociones: Afecto y cultura en América Latina* (2012) are two earlier texts that explore the 'affective turn' in Latin American cultural and cinematic critique. Considering its application in feminist and queer studies on emotion and trauma (McHugh, 2021), affect theory has become particularly useful in examining cinematic representations of women's experiences of violence, trauma, and resilience. In 'The poetics of affective filmmaking about feminicidio in Ciudad Juárez' (Finnegan, 2020), Nuala Finnegan, drawing from Ahmed (2004), explores how the films in her research[11] use affective expressions like sadness and anger to shape narratives of violence. In doing so, she argues that the films offer a more nuanced understanding of the systemic violence women face. In 'Writing from the gut: Embodied spectatorship and violence in contemporary Mexican cinema', Olivia Consentino, adopting a Deleuzian-Massumi framework, notes that many contemporary Mexican films have shifted from graphic depictions of violence to explore invisible and challenging-to-represent aspects (2021).

Together, these feminist film theorists highlight how Latin American filmmakers carve spaces for alternative cinematic practices that foreground affect, agency, solidarity, resistance and the complexity of their experiences. At the same time, gaps remain in research on audience reception and on how such films translate into concrete social change.

[10] See Chapter Three Atmospheres of Violence
[11] *Blood Rising* (2013) by Mark McLoughlin and *La Batalla de las cruces* (2005) by Patricia Ravelo Blancas and Rafael Bonilla

Chapter Two: Structures of Violence

This chapter introduces the films that underpin my research into how contemporary Mexican women's cinema challenges dominant portrayals of GBV. It explores the socio-political and economic contexts that generate and sustain such violence, as well as their cinematic representation, underscoring the power of film in subverting victim-blaming narratives that hide state accountability. In Mexico, state authorities approach cases of GBV individually (or not at all) and ignore systemic causes. The country's justice and security institutions lack a gender perspective that recognises the gendered dimensions of femicide and disappearance cases. Furthermore, the absence of legislative uniformity across various states hampers the government's capacity to address these issues effectively. This is reflected in the fact that only 23% of women's murders between 2015 and 2021 were investigated as possible feminicides (Rodríguez, 2022). As Kloppe-Santamaría states: 'VAW has been, at the very best, addressed as an afterthought, as part of those 'other' forms of violence impacting citizens in the "public realm"' (2021, p. 4).

Additionally, Mexican journalist Lydiette Carrión (2014) asserts that the state's failure to maintain accurate and comprehensive data on feminicide has created a 'black hole' in public knowledge and accountability. When cases are reported in the media, they reproduce victim-blaming narratives that render GBV a private or domestic issue and exploit women's suffering. As Susan Sontag notes, 'the problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they only remember the photographs.' (p. 89). Her words allude to the power of film in revealing the systems and structures that sustain conditions of GBV. Considering this, I argue that women's cinema becomes a vital act of cultural and political resistance that offers intersectional representations and locates GBV within broader power and impunity structures, thus encouraging greater accountability and bolstering intersectional resistance.

The films under discussion - *Noche de Fuego* by Tatiana Huezo, *Luchadoras* by Paola Calvo and Patrick Jasim and *Ruido* by Natalia Beristáin – offer distinct yet interconnected perspectives on GBV in Mexico. By situating each film within its specific socio-political and economic context – *Noche de Fuego* explores the kidnapping and trafficking of girls in Guerrero, *Luchadoras* exposes pervasive machismo and feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, and *Ruido* critiques institutional complicity in the country's epidemic of disappearances – this chapter highlights how

these films foreground the systemic and structural nature of GBV, revealing its function within violent heteropatriarchal power hierarchies. By placing these cinematic narratives in dialogue, this chapter reflects a feminist commitment to understanding GBV not as a series of isolated incidents but as part of a broader structural 'gendered continuum of violence' (Kelly, 1987). The concept is premised on the idea that gendered power differentials within heteropatriarchal societies shape how men and women move through life; it facilitates understandings of violence as interrelated, overlapping and reinforcing (see Kelly, 1987). By drawing attention to the broader socio-political conditions – including legal frameworks, policing, and governmental responses – this chapter also echoes the work of Latin American theorists and their conceptualisation and use of the term 'feminicide' (Fragoso & Bejarano, 2010; Lagarde y de los Rios, 2006). This term is more specific to the situation in Latin America and Mexico, where persistence of gender violence is tied to a combination of heteropatriarchal norms, impunity, corruption and systemic neglect (Mehan & Dominguez, 2024).

I will draw on Segato's work 'Las nuevas formas de la guerra y el cuerpo de las mujeres' (2014) to emphasise how each film represents the way, in contemporary wars across the Americas, women's bodies are used as 'symbolic battlefields' to uphold heteropatriarchal power structures. Segato describes new forms of warfare in the Americas, particularly in Mexico, as informal, highlighting how they currently unfold in an informal space that can be characterised as parastatal, because it is controlled by armed organisations with participation from both state and non-state military personnel (such as factions, gangs, mercenaries, and paramilitary groups) (Segato, 2014, p. 341). She references Dario Azzellini (2005), who depicts a shift from mercenaries as small, marginal groups to large, organised corporations of war, lacking ethical or legal constraints usually applied to state military forces. As Segato asserts, in these violent contexts, the female body has transitioned from a marginal to a central position, being used as a 'symbolic battlefield' (2014) to demonstrate the moral destruction of the enemy, especially when this cannot be staged through public signing of a formal document.

> Esta violencia corporativa y anómica se expresa de forma privilegiada en el cuerpo de las mujeres, y esta expresividad denota precisamente el espíritu-de-corps de quienes la perpetran, se 'escribe' en el cuerpo de las mujeres victimizadas por la conflictividad informal al hacer de sus cuerpos el bastidor en el que la estructural de la guerra se manifiesta (Segato, 2003; 2006; 2011; 2012; 2013).

Segato argues that VAW is no longer solely instrumental but also 'expressive' (2014), serving to perform and sustain heteropatriarchal masculinity mandates. She further contends that increased control over women's bodies reflects broader societal issues: it arises from the 'precariousness of life' in modern capitalist societies, where men, disempowered by unemployment and distance from community, turn to violent assertion (2021). Importantly, Segato maintains that this violent expression and its normalisation depend on a 'pedagogy of cruelty,' which systematically diminishes compassion, empathy, and community bonds (2018, p. 11).

Similarly, Valencia's theory of 'gore capitalism' (2018) reveals the role of hyper-masculinity and hyper-consumption in the frame of neoliberal precarisation. According to Valencia, this theory refers to 'the undisguised and unjustified bloodshed that is the price the Third World pays for adhering to the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism. It also refers to the many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organised crime, gender, and the predatory use of bodies.' (2018, p. 19) that is played out brutally and violently because 'the destruction of the body in itself is the product of commodity' (2018, p. 20). Drawing on the cinematic genre[12], Valencia repurposes the term to signal how extreme brutality becomes central to late twentieth and early twenty-first-century capitalism. By linking this spectacle of violence to economic structures, specifically in Mexico, Valencia critiques how the state, precarious labour, and exploitative practices – alongside a dominant and lucrative drug trade – have produced populations vulnerable to violence, whether as perpetrators or victims. Within this system, radical violence emerges as a form of entrepreneurial labour for precarious men – the 'endriago subjects' – who derive status through 'necroempowerment.'

Considering this, I will examine the films' representation of Mexico's web of violence, which relates to the country's complex and interconnected violence. I argue that, using documentary and fiction, they foster a more comprehensive understanding of the deep roots of heteropatriarchal and colonial logics within Mexico's socio-political and economic landscape. Furthermore, I highlight their interrogation of how, in Mexico and other 'Third World' countries, GBV and violence in general have intensified because of the increasingly demanding logic of capitalism and neoliberalism. In this sense, like Segato and Valencia, I emphasise how they

[12] The term 'gore' is taken from a genre of films characterised by extreme, brutal violence. (Valencia, 2018)

show that both men and women are victims of such societal, political and economic shifts. I underscore their portrayal of how different forms of violence – such as organised crime, impunity, machista culture, state repression, and socio-economic inequality – intersect and reinforce each other through a shared heteropatriarchal logic, thereby disproportionately affecting women and girls, creating conditions of unrelenting 'multisited violence' (Menjívar, 2011). This term is summarised as a 'potent combination of structural, symbolic, political, gender and gendered, and everyday forms of violence' (Walsh & Menjívar, 2016, p. 586). Furthermore, I explore how they depict GBV as a symptom of a neoliberal capitalist society, which causes the 'precariousness of life' and the 'precarity of men' while drawing attention to the 'pedagogy of cruelty' that sustains it. I argue that such alternative cinematic representations are crucial for equipping us with the conceptual tools needed to understand and advocate against GBV, and for providing women with better opportunities for self-determination and agency.

Noche de Fuego:

Tatiana Huezo's debut feature-length fictional film, *Noche de Fuego* (2021), offers a harrowing depiction of systemic violence through the lives of three girls - Ana, María, and Paula - growing up in a remote mountain village in Guerrero. Adapted from Jennifer Clement's novel, *Prayers for the Stolen* (2014), the film draws on the real-life experiences of young girls in Guerrero, who face the constant threat of abduction by local drug cartels, and their mothers, who must resort to extreme measures to protect them, including hiding them in holes and cutting off all their hair. Unlike other kidnappings across the country, the abduction of girls from their homes, schools, or streets is referred to as *robadas,* which indicates that they are not taken for ransom but for sex trafficking. This distinction often results in underreporting and invisibility of such crimes (Clement, 2014).

Beyond the vulnerability of the girls, *Noche de Fuego* reveals the broader impact of organised crime on community life. Huezo's narrative exposes how Guerrero's illicit mining and opium economies empower organised crime groups to extend political influence (Felbab-Brown, 2020), entrenching their legitimacy and worsening cycles of oppression. In other words, the film illustrates how organised crime erodes and fragments social fabric and infrastructure, leaving adolescents especially exposed: both as direct victims of cartel violence and through structural

harms caused by disruptions to their education, which heightens their risk of forced recruitment into the drug trade. The following paragraphs situate *Noche de Fuego* within its socio-political and economic context before turning to its cinematic representation.

Guerrero is dominated by organised crime groups, who take advantage of the region's extractive resources: poppy crops for opium and heroin, and soil for minerals such as uranium, gold, silver and others. Despite these resources, it remains the second poorest state in the country, with 66% of people living in poverty. Organised crime groups often displace entire communities from areas where mining companies want to explore, using violence as a means of threatening those who oppose their presence (Santaolalla, 2023). They have taken advantage of extreme corruption and lack of state protection, and embedded themselves within local institutions, including law enforcement and education systems. By doing so, criminal organisations are further legitimised, physically showing the power that involvement in the drug trafficking industry can bring. State actors - such as soldiers, police, and government officials - are responsible for human rights violations by actively participating in killings and disappearances, colluding with criminal groups, and obstructing accountability for their abuses and cartel crimes (International Human Rights, 2024). As a result, criminal violence has morphed into local armed conflicts, in which civilians are the main victims (Santaolalla, 2023). In this context of informality (Segato, 2014), the killing, sexual assault, and kidnapping of young female and feminised bodies is an expression of power and dominance, aimed at society and at other rival gangs.

Furthermore, Guerrero is notorious for its high rates of impunity, with Sandra Luz Valdovinos Salmeró, Attorney General of the State of Guerrero, accused of having an 'impunity agreement' with the Sinaloa Cartel (International Human Rights, 2024). The elevated levels of impunity, as well as gravely endangering young girls who are targeted, also place those who oppose violent cartels, mining and government corruption in extreme danger. It is considered one of the deadliest places to be a journalist, especially a female journalist, in the Americas. In 2022, at least eleven journalists were killed because of their work (International Human Rights, 2024). Jennifer Clement had to leave Mexico after writing *Prayers for the Stolen*. She explains how 'one important publication – *Proceso* – akin to *Time Magazine* of Mexico – published a part of my novel in the news section, not in

cultural pages', which led to her receiving threats from 'most likely criminal mafias colluded with state governments.' (Clement, 2022). There are no precise figures regarding the number of women and girls being abducted and trafficked in Guerrero or Mexico. Nevertheless, one statistic all government and non-government agencies concur on is that instances of forced labour, debt bondage, and sex trafficking are escalating at an alarming rate (Clement, 2014).

The fictional village in *Noche de Fuego*, isolated in the mountainous and resource-rich region, remains under constant siege from new cartel factions competing for dominance over local mining and opium operations. Huezo illustrates how, within these contemporary wars, the community and community spaces are constantly threatened by the cartel's pursuit of territorial dominance. The 'expressive' quality (Segato, 2014)[13] of their violence is demonstrated by its enactment within communal spaces and upon female and feminised bodies. For instance, the new *Margaritos* cartel does a drive-by shooting during a day of significant communal importance (when the village is finally receiving long-awaited medical assistance), which functions as a deliberate act of intimidation (figure 1). The attack on the beauty salon, ordinarily a crucial site of refuge, solidarity, and informal knowledge sharing among women, further highlights the fragility of spaces that foster support and resilience among women. Another significant moment occurs when Ana and her mother are walking home after a village party and discover a woman's body in the bushes. A conversation between Rita and Paula's mother later reveals that there was a threatening message attached to the woman's body with a pin, though she did not disclose what it said. However, Paula's mother's response, that she was 'barely scraping by' and 'has nowhere to go', suggests that the message aimed to intimidate villagers into compliance with the *Margaritos*. Such a gesture underscores how women's bodies are rendered 'symbolic battlefields' in broader struggles for power within heteropatriarchal narco-logic. As Segato notes, 'en las marcas inscritas en estos cuerpos, las perpetradoras hacen pública su capacidad de dominio irrestricto sobre la localidad ante sus pares, ante la población local y ante los agentes de Estado, que son inermes o cómplices' (Segato, 2007, p. 43). Importantly, both scenes avoid graphic depictions of violence, instead centering the perspective of the girl's, encouraging meaningful reflection rather than desensitisation.

[13] Where violence is used to send a message of intimidation.

Figure 1. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:54:04. The *Margaritos* drive-by shooting shot from inside the beauty salon.

Figure 2. *Noche de Fuego*. 1:06:47. Ana and Paula overhear a conversation between their mothers in the other room, as they discuss a recent feminicide.

Threats of violence are amplified by the looming presence of the military, who occupy the streets and the skies. During poppy harvesting season, helicopters disperse toxic chemicals intended to destroy opium crops, but in the process contaminate the entire village, showing little regard for civilian safety (figure 3). A scene in which Paula is doused with chemicals on her way to school underscores how civilians are the primary victims in *las nuevas guerras*. Huezo also exposes the

military's collusion with the cartel when the girls witness them engaged in casual, friendly conversation. The camera does not linger on the men, but instead captures the close-up reactions of Ana, Paula, and María (Figure 4). In doing so, Huezo marks a key moment when the young girls confront the extent of their vulnerability within the village's heteropatriarchal power structure, while inviting the viewer to critique such conditions through their perspectives

Figure 3. *Noche de Fuego*, 1:55:22. Military helicopter sprays poison over village to 'protect' villagers from *narco* presence.

Figure 4. *Noche de Fuego*, 1:33:54. The girls overhear a conversation between a *narco* and police officer.

Figure 5. N*oche de Fuego*, 0:07:35. Villagers getting signal on their phones on the hillside.

Villagers are situated within a complex hierarchy of power, dominated by the cartel, which upholds an unending cycle of exploitation and structural violence. With most men having migrated in search of work, the village consists of elderly residents, women, and children, who depend on the unreliable remittances of their male relatives. Huezo highlights the community's economic precarity through scenes where villagers gather around one of the few spots with a mobile signal, attempting to contact relatives, presumably the men who have gone away for work, in hopes of receiving financial support (figure 5). Ana and her mother, Rita, exemplify this dynamic, often returning to the hillside in anticipation of news from Ana's absent father.

Forced labour under the cartel, either in the mines or poppy fields, becomes the villagers' only form of 'protection,' thus further entangling them in a cycle of violence. Compounding this is the deterioration of the local school, whose frequent closures – driven by cartel interference and corruption – render graduation nearly impossible for students. This breakdown in institutional support perpetuates generational vulnerability. With limited alternatives, young boys are assimilated into the drug trade (figure 6), while women and girls remain subject to the demands of heteropatriarchal violence. As Valenzuela (2012, p. 161) remarks, within the current context of economic precarity, lack of employment and the decline in education, adolescents constitute one of the most exposed groups to violence, as they become

absorbed into the drug trade. In this sense, *Noche de Fuego* gestures towards both Valencia and Segato's argument that GBV is symptomatic of broader societal collapse – of what Segato calls the 'precariousness of life' for both men and women. She writes:

> What weakens men, what makes them precarious and transforms them into powerless subjects, is the lack of employment, the insecurity of employment when they have it, the precariousness of all ties, the uprooting of various forms, the uprooting of family, locality… in short, the world moves in a way that they cannot control and leaves them in a precarious situation, but not as a consequence of the empowerment of women, but as a consequence of the precariousness of life, of the economy, of not being able to educate more, read more, have access to various forms of well-being (2021 [Interview]).

This fragility is embodied in one of the film's few male characters, María's older brother, whose absorption into the drug trade illustrates the 'precariousness of life' and the 'pedagogy of cruelty' in action. As he becomes increasingly entangled with the cartel's operations due to a lack of other options, violence transforms into a mechanism of survival, eventually making him complicit in the kidnapping of his own sister at the end of the film.

Figure 6. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:42:41. Young boy helps *Margarito* weigh out opium.

Through its fictional lens, *Noche de Fuego* portrays narco-violence in its many forms - forced labour, economic deprivation, systemic kidnapping, displacement, and militarisation. The film foregrounds the expressive nature of violence (while avoiding the use of graphic imagery) as a mechanism for sustaining heteropatriarchal

authority, transmitted across generations through a 'pedagogy of cruelty.' In doing so, it broadens the viewer's understanding of violence as a symptom of society, linked to societal transformations from communalism to narco-capitalism (Segato; Valencia), and intensified by insecurity, exploitation, and the disintegration of community bonds.

Luchadoras:

Paola Calvo and Patrick Jasim's 2021 documentary *Luchadoras* enters the lives of three *luchadoras* (Lady Candy, Mini Sirenita and Baby Star) - professional female fighters in the Mexican tradition of *Lucha Libre* - living in Ciudad Juárez, a city notorious for high levels of GBV and femicides. Through an intimate portrayal of each fighter - Lady Candy wishes to be reunited with her children who were taken to the U.S. by her abusive ex-partner, Mini Sirenita dreams of becoming a full-time *luchadora* and leaving her job at the maquila, and Baby Star is a young single mother who strives to relive her *Lucha Libre* childhood past - *Luchadoras* situates their stories, which represent those of many women in Mexico, within the broader socio-political and economic landscape of Juárez[14].

Like *Noche de Fuego*, Calvo and Jasim's documentary *Luchadoras* does not depict women in Ciudad Juárez as passive victims of violence. Instead, through what Calvo terms 'cine personal' (2025), a style that emphasises the protagonists' personal lives and everyday violence through conversations with friends, family and state actors, it creates an impression of the cultural, economic, and political structures that perpetuate their condition of marginalisation. At the beginning, the film alludes to how Ciudad Juárez's border location has created conditions where globalisation operates as a colonial force, sustaining itself through the stigmatisation of Mexican bodies and, more specifically, the exploitation and disposability of 'the poor, dark-skinned mestizo women' (Segato, 2008, p. 79). This dynamic is established early in the documentary through the contrasting descriptions of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso: while Juárez is labelled 'la ciudad más peligrosa del mundo,' El Paso is deemed 'la ciudad más segura del mundo.' This juxtaposition highlights not only the violent realities women face in Ciudad Juárez but also the enduring power asymmetries between the U.S. and Mexico. The division between these two cities is not only

[14] See Literature Review section 1.1.4.

geographic but symbolic, reinforcing a colonial hierarchy that racialises and devalues Mexican lives in opposition to the perceived safety and order of the United States.

Through 'cine personal' (Calvo, 2025), *Luchadoras* exposes the institutional manifestations of machismo that exacerbate Mexican women's victimised position. For instance, the documentary traces Lady Candy's efforts to reunite with her children, who are in the U.S. with her abusive Mexican ex-partner. Having migrated there for work, he is now actively preventing Lady Candy from seeing/contacting them. Her interaction with the judicial system, where she must justify leaving an abusive relationship, highlights the institutional invalidation of women's experiences and a broader culture of impunity. A conversation with her mother further illustrates the gender bias embedded in legal responses, as it highlights how Lady Candy's ex-partner's actions are not classified as kidnapping; the reverse scenario would likely result in criminal charges. Additionally, a close-up, intimate shot of a conversation between Lady Candy and Mini Sirenita in the boxing ring exposes the deeply entrenched machista cultural norms that reinforce women's subaltern status (figure 7). These narratives reveal how, in Mexico, institutional GBV is sustained through the prevalence of machismo and the gendered expectations of women. The close-up framing and informal, conversational style, characteristic of 'cine personal', further captures the everyday nature of sexism in the lives of Juarense women.

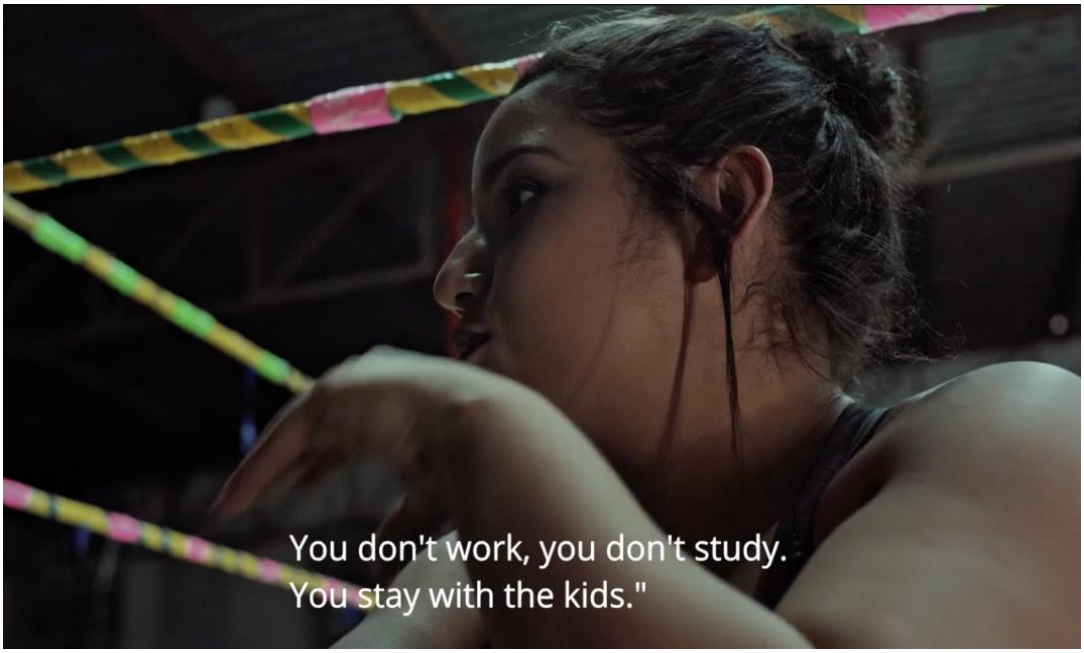

Figure 7. *Luchadoras*, 0:24:36. Lady Candy discusses her previous abusive relationship with Mini Sirenita.

Beyond legal and state-sanctioned heteropatriarchal violence, *Luchadoras* illuminates how the economic structures of Ciudad Juárez, particularly the maquiladora industry, systematically endanger women's lives. The narrative arc of Mini Sirenita, who aspires to leave the maquiladora industry to pursue a career in professional wrestling, extends beyond a personal ambition; it also serves as a critique of the structural precarity endured by working-class women in Ciudad Juárez. The underpaid labour (50$ per week), coupled with the dangers of commuting through unprotected spaces, as encapsulated in a scene where Mini Sirenita reassures her mother of her safety via a phone call during her walk home from work, reflects how economic survival has become entangled with daily exposure to violence. As scholars Mehan and Domínguez (2024) argue, the isolation of maquiladora workers, who often live on the outskirts of the city and must navigate long, unsafe commutes to their workplace, is a key factor in the heightened vulnerability of women in Ciudad Juárez.

Figure 8. *Luchadoras*, 0:43:02. Lady Candy, Baby Star and her sister Little Star are shot doing fighting poses by the border, as a car stops and watches them.

These gendered spatial vulnerabilities that have come to define the lives of Juarense women are further highlighted through the natural encounters captured while filming them around the city. One particularly revealing moment occurs when shooting the wrestlers enacting fighting scenes near the border, and they start being watched by a car (figure 8). This scene exemplifies how women in Juárez are

threatened simply for occupying public spaces, as one of the fighters bluntly states to Lady Candy after the affair took place: 'ustedes fueron al matadero.' By highlighting the personal struggles of Lady Candy and Mini Sirenita, the documentary exposes how the intersections of state failure, machista culture, and the economic exploitation of women in the *maquiladoras* create an environment of pervasive insecurity for women. Furthermore, it demonstrates how their mobility across urban, national and symbolic boundaries is persistently contained, revealing how deeply embedded gendered and racialised violence is within both local geographies and broader transnational dynamics.

Ruido:

Natalia Beristáin's feature-length fiction film, *Ruido* (2022), follows Julia, a mother searching for her daughter Gertrudis ('Ger'), who disappeared nine months ago during a trip to San Luís Potosí. During her search, Julia travels across the country, meeting journalists, police officers, and other mothers who have experienced the same ordeal. Julia's tragedy highlights the vast and growing number of individuals, particularly women, in Mexico affected by the epidemic of disappearances. The following two paragraphs discuss the socio-political and economic context underpinning *Ruido* before turning to its cinematic representation.

With over 115,000 people missing in the country (Palacios, 2024), the crisis is part of the wider pattern of criminal violence in Mexico, driven by organised crime and the involvement and complicity of state actors in these criminal activities. As a recent report from the International Federation for Human Rights (2024) emphasises, the number of missing women and girls in Mexico has tripled over the past six years. This alarming trend is closely linked to the pervasive problem of human trafficking in Mexico. As Juan Carlos Gutiérrez, legal director at IDHEAS (Litigio Estratégico en Derechos Humanos), states:

> The disappearance of women and girls linked to trafficking is not an isolated problem. These horrors are the product of a violent, machista, and sexist heteropatriarchal culture. Violence against women is normalised. Prejudice and discrimination trivialise human trafficking. Disregard for the dignity of women victims and their suffering is the constant response of the authorities (2025).

The judicial and political authorities' failure to thoroughly investigate the link between disappearances and human trafficking, especially for sexual exploitation, prevents an adequate institutional response. The issue is further compounded by

discriminatory biases and prejudices among public officials, which lead to the re-victimisation of the women and their families (Kloppe-Santamaría & Zulver, 2023), causing an increase in cases and making access to justice almost impossible for families. Because the government fails to investigate, many women take on the burden of searching for their loved ones and are forced to become their own forensic experts and activists. The risks they face in this pursuit are significant: women in search of their loved ones are also vulnerable to GBV and face harassment, retaliation, and even death because of their activism (Kloppe-Santamaría & Zulver, 2023). Considering this, Zulver (2024) argues that *madres buscadoras,* the women searching for the disappeared, operate in a condition of unrelenting 'multisited violence.'

In an interview published online for Netflix, Beristáin expressed her intentions to explore the interwoven nature of violence in *Ruido,* underscoring the opportunities that fiction granted her:

> You cannot talk about the disappearance of women without mentioning femicides, and you cannot talk about femicides without talking about impunity. And we can't talk about impunity without going into organised crime. Fiction allowed me to build the story in this way and dive into all these aspects (2025).

The film delivers a sharp critique of Mexico's heteropatriarchal state, emphasising its role in the country's epidemic of disappearances and GBV, as well as its alliances with cartel groups. During her search for Ger, Julia's interactions with state actors reveal their reluctance to thoroughly investigate the links between human trafficking and disappearances, alongside the prejudice and discrimination that lead to the re-victimisation of women and their families. For example, the film begins with Julia and her husband being summoned to the prosecutor's office to identify an unidentified body that might be their missing daughter. The couple are attended by the third prosecutor assigned to their nine-month-long case and asked once again to recall basic details about Ger's disappearance. It is only after Julia provides this information that the authorities realise the body cannot be Ger's due to a visible tattoo, an oversight that exemplifies the state's inadequate response to disappearances, and their careless and re-traumatising treatment of grieving families. The same treatment is evidenced in Julia's interaction with a police officer in San Luís Potosí. When telling Julia and Abril Escobeda, a journalist assisting her, about a trailer containing the bodies of women who had been victims of sex

trafficking, the police officer refers to the women as 'muchacha bonita.' This remark demonstrates how societal VAW is often minimised, even justified, through the objectifying lens of women's physical appearance (figure 9).

Julia's experience with the police further demonstrates the economic precarity imposed on *madres buscadoras* – a further form of structural violence – given that they must leave their jobs and pay to carry out the investigation. After insisting that the police take them to the trailer to determine whether Ger's body is among the women, Julia is forced to pay the police to investigate the trailer herself, the opportunity being described to her as a 'favour'. This theme becomes even more apparent later in the film through Julia's interactions with other collectives of *madres buscadoras*, who have devoted their lives to searching for their loved ones and, in doing so, are effectively assuming the role of the police. It is important to note that Julia's character is a white, middle-class woman from Mexico City who works as an artist. In this respect, she is comparatively protected from the compounded vulnerabilities of racialised and class-based forms of GBV that disproportionately impact Indigenous women living in Mexico's poorest areas.

Figure 9. *Ruido,* 0:49:19. Police officer in San Luís Potosí describes women found in trailer as 'pura muchacha bonita.'

Ruido exposes the hierarchy of heteropatriarchal power embedded in Mexico's web of violence, reinforced by impunity and state complicity, which places those investigating cases of GBV - or actively involved in colectivos such as *madres*

buscadoras - in grave danger. In a harrowing scene where Abril is forcibly removed from a bus by military personnel on her return from San Luís Potosí (figure 10), the state's entanglement with criminal networks becomes undeniable. Journalists in Mexico are frequently targeted by state actors for investigating cartel violence, revealing the extent to which organised crime has infiltrated justice and law enforcement. Julia's vulnerability as a *madre buscadora* is revealed when she is followed by a car late at night, echoing Zulver's (2024) observations that these women are routinely watched, followed and sent warning signs by criminal organisations. Her eventual meeting with a cartel member, arranged by the police, underscores her precarious position. His final words to her: 'Ya no la busquen. No la vas a encontrar,' is both a threat and a demand, underscoring how heteropatriarchal dominance is enforced through the erasure of women's lives and the silencing of those who resist. Ultimately, *Ruido* exposes the gendered nature of impunity, demonstrating how women are disproportionately affected by state failures and targeted through a system that normalises their disposability. Furthermore, it reveals how state accountability is obscured through the perpetuation of victim-blaming narratives, which frame GBV as a natural consequence of women's physical appearance, and through the elimination of voices of denunciation and resistance, particularly journalists.

Figure 10. *Ruido*, 1:20:30. Journalist Abril Escobedo is forcibly removed from the bus on their way back from San Luís Potosí.

By exploring different forms of GBV, *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras*, and *Ruido* challenge victim-blaming narratives and emphasise that gendered violence is not just a series of isolated tragedies but a fundamental aspect of political and economic systems. Using documentary and fiction techniques, these films offer a more profound critique of how GBV is not an isolated event but reflective of broader social changes, where heteropatriarchal narco-capitalist demands weaken community bonds, exposing most civilians to violence. In this 'precarious' (Segato, 2021) landscape, women's bodies become 'symbolic battlefields' (Segato, 2014), serving as sites for demonstrating and reinforcing heteropatriarchal authority. Furthermore, each film reveals how women experience structural violence through impunity, economic insecurity, forced labour, displacement, and militarisation – conditions that intensify their marginalisation and hinder resistance.

By revealing the structural and expressive dimensions of GBV and feminicide in Mexico, as well as the 'pedagogy of cruelty' that sustains them, the films challenge dominant narratives propagated by the government and mainstream media that portray such violence as natural or private, thus absolving the state of responsibility. In doing so, these films align with Segato's (2016) assertion that state institutions are structurally incapable of effectively addressing GBV. Instead, they illustrate alternative cinema's potential as a crucial counter-narrative tool, capable of dissecting Mexico's networks of violence and bolstering more intersectional forms of resistance that go beyond framing GBV as just a 'woman's issue.'

Chapter Three: Atmospheres of Violence

This chapter investigates how *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras* and *Ruido* challenge mainstream media representations of GBV, which often reproduce its expressive dimensions to reinforce heteropatriarchal-narco dominance and contribute to its naturalisation within society. Valencia notes the media's role in the spread of 'gore capitalism,' arguing that, 'what the media seeks to do is legitimate its existence and impede actions by society to counter it' (p. 238). Berlanga Gayón argues that images are portrayed through *encuadres del patriarcado* (2018), to reinforce power dynamics and the idea that women's lives are 'disposable.' She suggests that they contribute to a *pedagogía de miedo* (2018) directed at women and society at large. Similarly, according to Lagros Lira and Toledo (2014), images of feminicide serve to instil shock, as opposed to empathy, and to increase levels of fear in women as a mechanism that contributes to their subordination. Crucially, the frequency with which these images are disseminated contributes to society's indifference and inaction. As Susan Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), relentless exposure to violent images produces an effect of paralysis and erosion of compassion: 'Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock or arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is going numb.' (p. 38). In contrast, the films under analysis reject the use of the spectacle and instead focus on affective and embodied experiences of fear and insecurity that women face in violent environments. By doing so, they foster a more empathetic and critical form of spectatorship, encouraging viewers to emotionally engage with stories of violence that have become normalised within society, and with the lives of those who have long been treated as 'ungrievable' (Butler, 2006).

In *las nuevas guerras*, understood as Mexico's contemporary conflicts within the so-called 'war on drugs', fear is weaponised as a mechanism of social control, perpetuating social fragmentation and hindering mobilisation. As journalist Marcela Turati explains:

> La violencia se convierte en una amenaza permanente. Instaura el régimen de la desconfianza. Desintegra lazos sociales primarios. Carcome la vida en común. Se aloja donde se desenvuelven las relaciones humanas. Los lugares públicos se vuelven inseguros. Las fiestas ya no convocan gente desde que son profanadas. Los funerales se convierten en ritos privados a los que acuden únicamente los íntimos. Nadie quiere mantener el reto con la familia de un difunto. Todos son sospechosos (Turati, 2011, pp. 71-72).

Her words underscore how violence manifests as an embodied emotional state - fear, distrust, and unsafety – that deeply impacts social relations and the social fabric. This perspective aligns with the work of feminist geographers, such as Christian and Dowler (2019), who argue for a more complex understanding of violence that includes the emotional, intimate, and everyday experiences of violence, and underscores their inherent connection to the more visible 'spectacular' eruptions of violence. Sjoberg and Gentry (2015) further emphasise that an embodied view of violence connects its psychological effects to daily life and 'what it means to live.' Similarly, Prat and Rosner (2012) suggest that women's everyday experiences of harm extend beyond the physical to encompass invisible forms of violence, such as deprivation, fear, humiliation, vulnerability, and what they term 'ugly feelings' such as anger – affective states that resist conventional representations and invite a more nuanced understanding of harm.

Amid the pervasive physical and psychological violence experienced by women in Mexico within *las nuevas guerras*, and the media's strategic deployment of fear through sensationalist portrayals that reinforce racialised and gendered power dynamics, Sara Ahmed's phenomenological conceptualisation of affect provides a crucial lens for analysing the films' creation of an 'atmosphere of violence.' Ahmed describes affect as a connective tissue that circulates between bodies, shaping collective orientations and attachments (2004/2010). She emphasises how fear 'opens up past histories that stick to the present' (2004, p. 123) establishing or reinforcing culturally determined oppositions between identities. Her framing foregrounds fear's anticipatory, intentional nature, noting that 'before we are affected, before something happens that creates an impression on the skin, things are already in place that incline us to be affected in some ways more than others.' (2010, pp. 230-31). This perspective supports my analysis of how each film constructs an 'atmosphere of violence' - not only by viscerally immersing the viewer in the protagonist's embodied emotional experiences through techniques such as camera movement, sound design and music – but also by evoking the conscious collective emotional attachments that sustain and intensify fear. These attachments, rooted in personal memory and media narratives, circulate across characters and audiences, generating affective tensions that communicate both the lived experience of inhabiting an environment marked by extreme violence, and expose the socio-political mechanisms that perpetuate such fear.

This chapter thus explores how *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras* and *Ruido* reveal how fear can be weaponised in *las nuevas guerras,* where violence, or its persistent threat, is used to constrain women's mobility and regulate their political agency. While *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras* foreground fear as an immediate manifestation of violence, I extend this affective lens in *Ruido* to examine complex and enduring fear of never seeing a loved one again, as experienced by the families of the disappeared, as well as their grief and loss. I also examine their use of symbolic imagery to communicate the gendered vulnerability of girls and women, in a way that is critical of the structures that perpetuate their condition, as opposed to reproducing them. Drawing on the Spanish *afecto*, encompassing care and affection, I argue that these affective representations of GBV reclaim empathy and restore the humanity of those affected by foregrounding what it feels like to live in the shadow of violence. In doing so, they offer alternative narratives to mainstream portrayals that seek to erase or flatten such affective resonances.

Noche de Fuego:

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of how *Noche de Fuego* reveals the heteropatriarchal hierarchy of narco-power, this section investigates how fear, especially among the village's women and girls, operates as an invisible, embodied form of violence that further erodes community ties and perpetuates social fragmentation. Through intimate portrayals of its protagonists, the film reveals how relationships are shaped by the tension of living amid persistent threat, therefore affecting 'what it means to live' (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2015). As Huezo makes clear: 'En esta película la violencia es un monstruo al que no vemos, que está ahí, que está latente, que lo envuelve todo y que al mismo tiempo no podemos identificar plenamente: puede venir de la mina, de los militares o de los narcos.' (2022). One of the film's most striking features is the atmosphere it constructs through sensorial cinematic techniques, such as the use of sound, hand-held camera, and close-up shots. In doing so, it pulls the viewers into the protagonists' emotional interiority to communicate the psychological and emotional toll of violence woven into everyday life. Furthermore, through immersive shots of the natural landscape and its destruction via mining, *Noche de Fuego* conveys a sense of violence as an abstract, dominating force that is woven into the social fabric.

Noche de Fuego is structured around two distinct periods, when the girls – Ana, María and Paula - are nine and fourteen. In the first half, which follows them at age nine, the film employs a square aspect ratio (of 1.66:1) that centres the girls within the frame and visually separates them from the adult world. This stylistic choice preserves their sense of innocence and emotional purity. As cinematographer Dariela Ludlow explains, 'era muy importante que ellas estuvieran en su universo, lejos de toda esa violencia que les estaban echando.' (2022). However, the film makes visual use of the girls' innocence to convey and contrast their position as 'targets' (Ludlow, 2022), highlighting how their youth and gender are tied to their vulnerability and potential death. This tension is powerfully introduced in the film's opening scene, where Ana and her mother dig a hole for Ana to hide in when the cartel forcibly searches their house unannounced. The image (figure 11) of Ana in the grave-like hole serves as an ominous foreshadowing of her 'precarious life' (Butler, 2006) as a young, poor, brown-skinned girl in the colonial modern patriarchy (Segato, 2023). Huezo immerses us in Ana and her mother's sense of fear and urgency by accentuating their heavy breathing and by using a hand-held camera. A similar visual metaphor, which represents how Ana is trapped – both physically and symbolically – within the condition of girlhood, is achieved later in the film when Ana is tightly confined beneath the bed sheets on Juana's bed, imbued in red light (figure 12). As she lies there, we hear helicopters in the background, signalling danger. This image reinforces the idea that Ana is defenceless in the face of violence. Both scenes draw a stark contrast between Ana's innocence and her closeness to death, inviting a form of empathetic spectatorship that compels viewers to confront the structural and representational conditions that sustain her vulnerability, and challenges images that render certain lives more grievable than others.

Figure 11. *Noche de Fuego*. 0:02:21. Ana measures her body in the hole that she has dug with her mother, where she will hide when the *narcos* arrive to kidnap her.

Figure 12. *Noche de Fuego*. 0:27:15. Ana confines herself beneath Juana's bed sheets. Room is imbued with red light.

As viewers, we are invited to experience the embodied fear/knowledge of the mothers in the village through their hidden glances, which the camera captures but the girls do not see. In doing so, Huezo seeks to create an affective tension between the viewer, the mothers and the girls. For example, when Ana and her friend Paula have their hair cut short at the beauty salon, Ana's mother proclaims to her that it is

to prevent lice. Yet as viewers, we can discern the real motive, that it is to disguise their gender, through the silent, knowing exchanges between the women (figure 13). When the girls are older, rites of passage that typically signify the transition into womanhood, such as Ana getting her period, are not celebrated as markers of growth but are instead reframed as warnings, signifying an increased proximity to danger. Ana's mother's facial expression alone reflects to the viewer the impending threat of violence and subtly contributes to Ana's developing understanding of a social order in which femininity is equated to disposability (figure 14). Furthermore, the lack of explanatory dialogue, other than the suggestive expressions shared between the mothers and viewers, means we remain immersed in their embodied fear. Consequently, we start to experience fear for the girls when they walk around the village and come to expect violence around every corner.

Figure 13. *Noche de Fuego*. 1:30:50. Camera captures the reflection of Ana and Paula's mothers as they lie to the girls about why they are getting their hair chopped off.

Figure 14. *Noche de Fuego*. 0:20:37. Ana's mother hands Ana pads on the day she gets her period for the first time.

The notion that violence within *las nuevas guerras* constitutes a permanent threat that disintegrates social relations (Turati, 2011) is represented through the women's relationships to newcomers in the village. For instance, after Juana is kidnapped, the new schoolteacher attempts to question the students' mothers about the situation, but they remain silent, unwilling to speak. Later, when Ana asks why no one told him anything, her mother explains that he cannot be trusted because no one knows him. In another scene, Ana suggests calling the police after hearing nearby fighting, to which her mother responds with a firm 'no,' underscoring the complete breakdown of institutional trust and the internalisation of fear as a survival strategy. Such perceptions of distrust and unsafety, conditions which Sweet and Ortiz Escalante call 'a mirror of gendered power relations in society,' limit women's mobility and use of space and result in violence being everywhere. (2014, p. 1832).

The use of sound and natural imagery further enhances the film's atmosphere of violence and affective tension. As Ludlow notes, one of the film's main objectives is to 'no mostrar la violencia, sino sentirla, saber que está ahí,' emphasising that 'la imagen te envuelve en lo hermoso que son los paisajes; sin embargo, te esconde lo crudo de la violencia contra las mujeres.' (2022). The beauty of the mountain and the surrounding landscapes hide the violence hidden within. Creatures like snakes and scorpions embody the constant, lurking threat of danger. This idea is reinforced

through the depiction of mining. Close-up, phallic shots of machines drilling into rock (figure 15) and wide-angle shots of explosions on the mountainside (figure 16) underscore the immense force of extraction. Furthermore, they symbolise the greed of capital within the heteropatriarchal-colonial modern project (Segato, 2016) and its destructive environmental consequences.

Figure 15. *Noche de Fuego*. 0:04:42. Close-up phallic shot of heavy machinery drilling into rocks.

Figure 16. *Noche de Fuego*. 0:03:56. Wide-angle shot of explosion on mountainside due to mining.

In contrast, intimate, close-up shots of young boys working in the mines, enveloped in clouds of smoke, poignantly highlight the human cost of such extraction and greed (figure 17). The emotional weight of these images is intensified by the film's sound design: extended silences are punctuated by the jarring sounds of machinery and explosions, immersing the viewer in a profoundly sonorous experience. These sonic elements play a vital role in expanding the atmosphere of violence beyond the purely visual. As Huezo mentions in a published interview:

> Esta película tiene un universo sonoro muy sensorial, con mucho silencio, pero también con mucho viento, muchos bichos, muchas atmosferas increíbles; y con una música impresionante de Leonardo Heiblum y Jacobo Lieberman (2021).

Moreover, the interplay of silence and sound in *Noche de Fuego* is essential for conveying the lived, embodied fear experienced by the girls and women in the village. Sound is revealed as a vital survival tool, illustrated through Ana's mother teaching her to distinguish between various noises and their distance from her. In this way, the audience is invited to understand and experience the significance of specific sounds, such as the distant rumbling indicating the approach of cartel trucks or the chopping sounds of helicopters. As a result, we gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing level of alertness required for surviving in such conditions.

Figure 17. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:14:12. Close-up shot of a young boy enveloped in a cloud of smoke from an explosion.

Luchadoras

Luchadoras, like *Noche de Fuego*, portrays fear as an embodied manifestation of violence. During an interview I conducted, co-director Paola Calvo remarks that in Juárez, 'el miedo se utiliza como herramienta para controlar a la gente,' adding that 'el miedo tiene muchísimo control sobre la gente y ayuda a controlar que la violencia sea más grande' (2025). Her words underscore how fear not only shapes everyday life by limiting women's physical mobility but also becomes a mechanism of social control whereby trust and community mobilisation become less achievable. This section explores how *Luchadoras* employs a range of cinematic techniques – storytelling, sound design, and visual imagery - to immerse viewers in women's lived experiences of fear while highlighting its role as a tool of social control. It also examines how the film's production was influenced by the very conditions of fear it aims to depict. Additionally, I analyse how the intimate, everyday moments captured in the film, which Calvo refers to as 'cine personal' (2025), reveal how violence has become ingrained into the social imaginary. By examining both the constructed (editing, sound) and spontaneous (shots of the streets, everyday life) elements of the documentary's production, I argue that *Luchadoras* not only captures the immediate effects of living in conditions of extreme violence but also invites a deeper engagement with its long-term, overlooked consequences.

Storytelling is one of the primary ways that fear is perpetuated in Juárez. The film replicates this by incorporating real stories of women, primarily maquiladora workers who have been victims of abuse by bus drivers in Juárez, as a central narrative device. Importantly, stories are not included for our viewer consumption but are used in tandem with close-up shots of women on the bus to convey the psychological impact that consistently hearing such stories might have on them (figure 18). In the opening scene, women are shown riding a bus as the voice of Lady Candy, one of the fighters, narrates, 'En Juárez, hay muchas historias.' This line immediately alludes to the power of stories in shaping and disseminating fear in the city. As the narrator recounts a harrowing story of a woman's encounter with a bus driver who nearly killed her, the camera lingers on the faces of the women on the bus, conveying the silent, collective fear they carry when using public transport. Her closing line, 'aquí es donde vivimos,' underscores that these stories are not fictional, but formative of the experiences of women living in Juárez, for whom threats of violence penetrate most aspects of their daily lives.

Figure 18. *Luchadoras*, 0:01:31. Close-up shot of a woman on a bus in Juárez.

Later in the film, a conversation between Lady Candy and Mini Sirenita, a maquiladora worker, further emphasises this theme. Lady Candy recounts her grandmother's experience working in the maquilas, focusing on the terror instilled by stories of bus drivers who targeted women on the way to work. She recalls how witnesses would close their windows in silence, too afraid to intervene. According to Lady Candy, it has become a local legend that those who turned away can still hear the victims' screams. As she speaks, the film shows haunting images of clothing remnants scattered across the desert, evoking the enduring presence of violence and loss (figure 19). Through incorporating women's oral testimonies and images of sites marked by violence, *Luchadoras* creates an immersive atmosphere shaped by the embodied fear of the women who inhabit these spaces, thus subverting the dehumanising and sensationalising *encuadres del patriarcado* (Berlanga Gayón, 2015) which aim to instil fear in women.

Figure 19. *Luchadoras*, 0:26:20. Clothing remnants that resemble those of a *luchadora*, in the desert in Juárez.

The spatial vulnerabilities and resulting feelings of unsafety experienced by women in Juárez, especially maquiladoras workers, are conveyed at the start of the film through shots that combine eerie soundscapes with dim lighting, emphasising the city's ominous atmosphere. While sound plays a crucial role in building suspense and tension, the primary way the film captures the palpable danger of the streets is simply through the fact most scenes are shot from a car window (figure 20). Calvo explained to me how fear impacted the production of *Luchadoras*, 'no pudimos grabar la ciudad como hubiese grabado la ciudad en un documental normal. Todos los planos de la ciudad son siempre desde el coche' (2025). The limited mobility of the *Luchadoras* production team reflects the very reality that women in Juárez face, and their constrained movement in the city, underscoring the idea that public space is, in many ways, non-existent for them. Most of the scenes of the protagonists are shot in their homes, in various modes of transport or at the lucha. When actions take place on the street, the camera pays careful attention to the characters' movements. A notable example occurs when we follow Mini Sirenita home from work (figure 21). Here, the camera's close, persistent tracking mirrors the vigilance and constant awareness women must maintain when navigating public areas. This sequence also follows the conversation between Mini Sirenita and Lady Candy, in which Lady Candy shares the tragic stories of maquiladora workers as told by her grandmother.

By integrating these personal accounts, the film echoes Mini Sirenita's sense of embodied vulnerability. Furthermore, the film's structure reflects how women are compelled to make these dangerous journeys out of necessity.

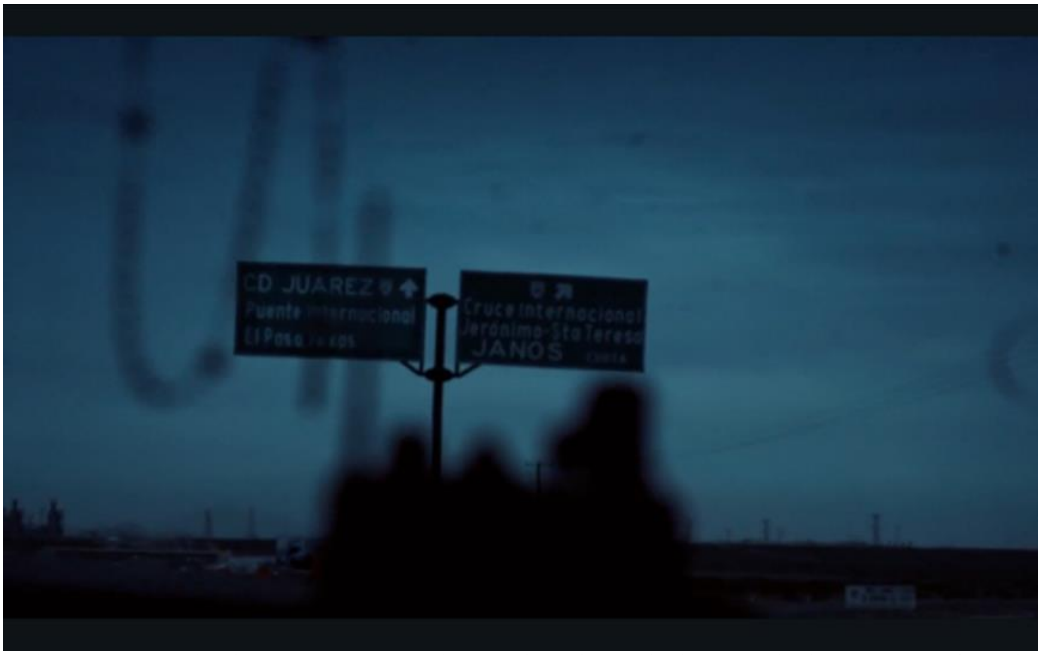

Figure 20. *Luchadoras*, 0:4:04. Ominous shot through the car window screen of road signs to Juárez at dusk.

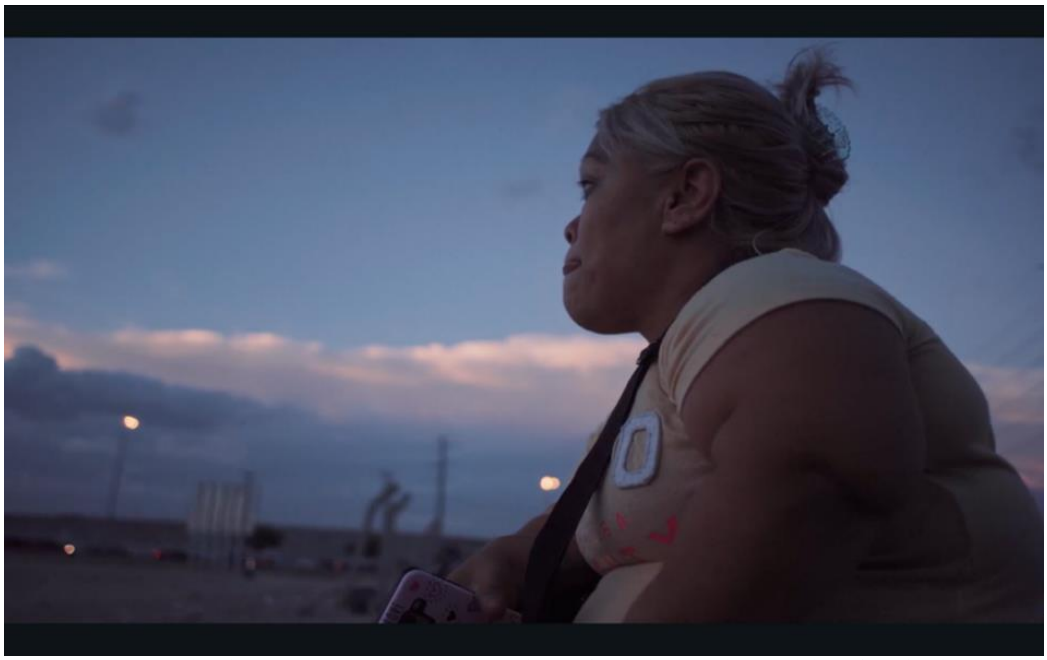
Figure 21. *Luchadoras*, 0:26:41. Close-up shot of Mini Sirenita waiting for the bus on the way home from the *maquilas*.

When asked how she and Patrick Jasim intended to capture the violence of Ciudad Juárez, Calvo responds, 'el miedo está en la calle, no había que hacer mucho

más que filmar la calle' (2025). Her statement points to the pervasive reminders of death in the urban landscape itself, which do not need to be dramatised, only observed. Street scenes expose the constant reminders of women's precarious existence: billboards of missing women loom over the roads (figure 22), and walls are plastered with posters bearing the faces of missing women. The film also weaves in news broadcasts on the radio and television, mostly as background elements, which highlight the normality of violence and underscore how fear spreads in the city.

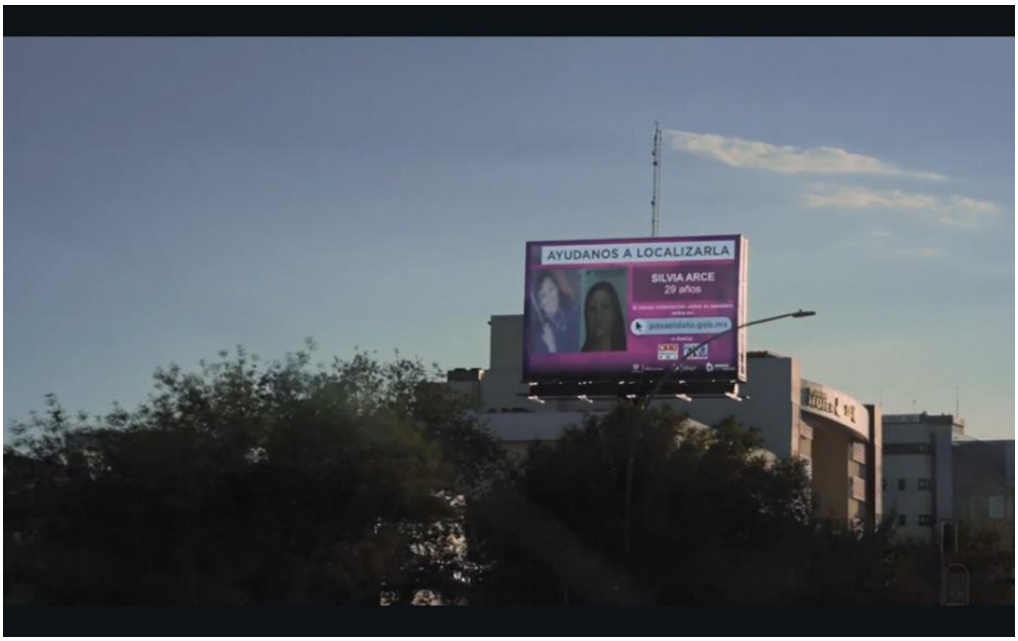

Figure 22. *Luchadoras*, 0:27:23. Billboard of missing women saying 'ayúdanos a localizarla.'

Moreover, *Luchadoras* explores the protagonists' personal lives, particularly Lady Candy's, illustrating how violence has become embedded in everyday reality and shaped the social fabric of the city. For example, one scene captures Lady Candy and two others reacting to a shooting in the street. One of them casually remarks how she always wondered who brought the white sheet to cover the body, contrasting it with her sheets that are decorated with flowers. Her words reflect a striking level of familiarity with such violence. Additional scenes – such as Lady Candy at work in a funeral home, and later with her mother at the cemetery discussing the many family members they have lost over the years (figure 23) - serve as reminders of collective loss. Through these intimate moments, *Luchadoras* not only reveals the enduring impacts of violence on Juárez's social consciousness but also illustrates how repetition makes it an invisible presence in daily life.

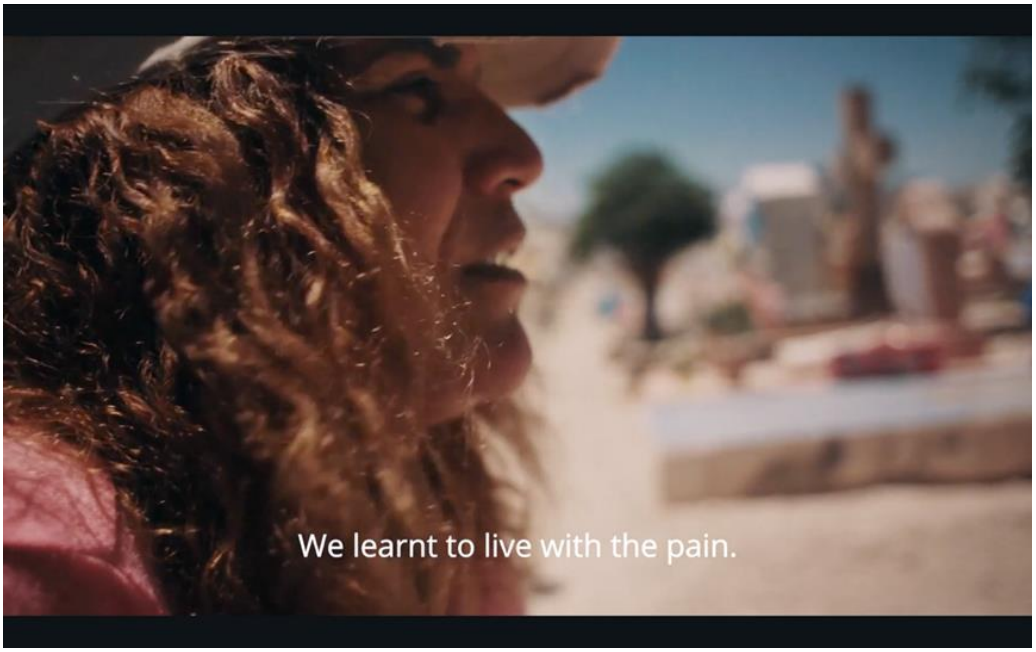

Figure 23. *Luchadoras*, 0:40:36. Close-up shot of Lady Candy's mother in the local cemetery as she talks about all the family members they have lost.

Ruido

Ruido shares thematic and atmospheric similarities with *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras*, as all three films centre on representing the emotional impact of GBV and its social reverberations. While Huezo and Calvo's films focus on the fear, insecurity and distrust stemming from living in a context of GBV, *Ruido* shifts the lens to reflect the embodied experience of the family members and communities grappling with the aftermath, specifically disappearances. *Madres buscadoras* endure the fear of not knowing whether their loved one is alive or dead, while also engaging in activism that puts them at a heightened risk of violence at the nexus of criminal organisation, state corruption and extreme insecurity (ICG, 2017). Given the unresolved nature of disappearances, the government's inaction, and the threats women face for their activism, this analysis explores how Beristáin represents fear, frustration, and grief as embodied forms of violence. Through an analysis of sound design, close-up cinematography, and symbolic imagery, I argue that *Ruido* creates an atmosphere of violence and affective tension, inviting the viewer to connect with the emotional interiority of the protagonists. In doing so, the film rehumanises stories of disappearance and renders visible the enduring emotional and communal impacts, including the fragmentation of the family.

As outlined in the previous chapter, *Ruido* follows the story of Julia, a mother searching for her daughter Gertrudis ('Ger'), who disappeared nine months earlier

during a trip to San Luís Potosí. According to director Natalia Beristáin, the film adopts the structure of a traditional 'road trip' (2025) movie. However, rather than offering a linear journey with a resolution, it unfolds as a deeply personal investigation and a broader reflection on the collective familial struggle and resistance against disappearances and impunity in Mexico. As Beristáin explained in our interview:

> Para mí se trataba de contar una parte de lo que puede ser el horror de lo que alguien vive buscando a su desaparecida, y eso tiene que ver con topar con la burocracia, con que no sabes si la policía te está ayudando o no te está ayudando, con encontrar y espejar tu dolor con otras familias que también lo están experimentando. (2025)

The film's repetitive rhythm and slow development - following each step of Julia's investigation from police stations to morgues and clandestine graves with little sign of resolution – reflects the stagnation and frustration endured by thousands of Mexican families whose cases become trapped in institutional limbo. Like *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras*, *Ruido* offers little explanatory dialogue or additional information beyond what the viewer gathers from Julia's conversations with police officials, thereby immersing in her feelings of uncertainty and the pain of not knowing. In this sense, the film fosters empathetic spectatorship of the enduring suffering and frustration that many families are going through as a result of the government's inaction.

The film's title, *Ruido*, is representative of all the noise and the cries for justice that have gone unheard by the state. Beristáin expresses this symbolism in the film by combining sound and cinematography to reflect state impunity and the emotional impacts of having a disappeared family member. For example, when Julia and her husband are at the prosecutor's office, the prosecutor informs them about the possibility of finding Ger's body in a hidden grave. As he describes the possible condition of Ger's body, sharp, ringing sounds drown out his voice, and the camera lingers on Julia's anguished expression, pulling us into her internal suffering (figure 24). The following shot shows her distant figure in a barren landscape (figure 25), the camera lens drifting in and out of focus as the ringing intensifies and insects chirp loudly. This recurring visual motif – Julia alone in a desolate place – follows moments of despair and uncertainty, underscoring the emotional toll of her search. For instance, it occurs after they go to visit a refuge, where they have been told Ger could be; however, they do not find her there. The second time is after Abril is

forcibly removed from a bus by military forces. In the empty landscape, Julia's screams are muffled and her surroundings blurred, highlighting the disorientating and isolating experience of being a *madre buscadora*.

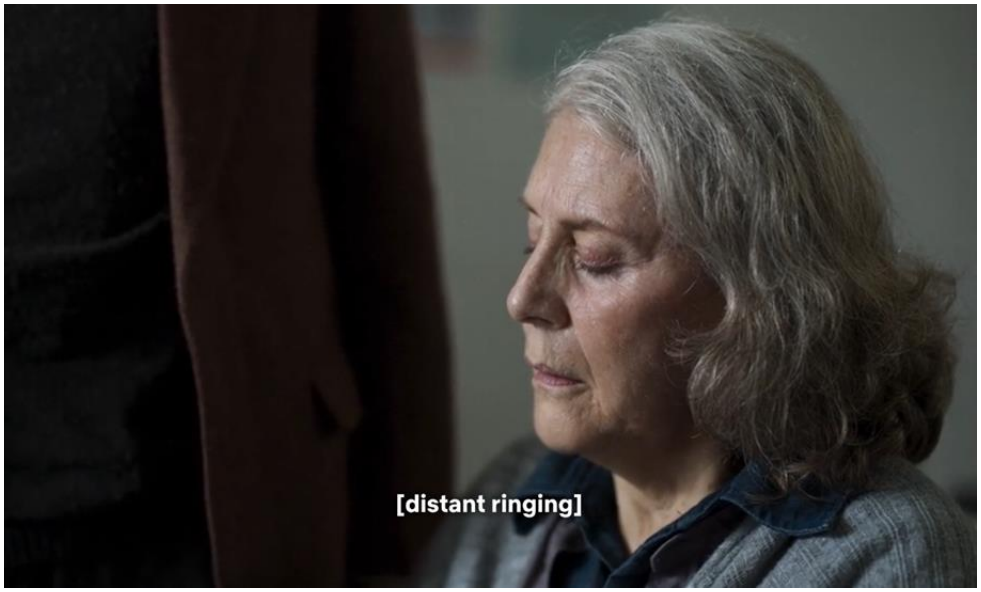

Figure 24. *Ruido*, 0:09:43. Close-up shot of Julia in the police station as the prosecutor tells her and her husband about the condition of the women's bodies found in the mass graves.

Figure 25. *Ruido*, 0:55:32. Wide-angle shot of Julia screaming in a barren landscape as her surroundings go in and out of focus.

Ruido also investigates the complex realm of grief and loss as overlooked effects of disappearances and the fragmentation of the family that ensues. As Beristáin notes during our interview:

> Casi todas las veces las familias se rompen porque tener a un desaparecido es vivir todos los días de su vida con un duelo suspendido, porque es esta constante pregunta de si está

> viva, donde está y que le están haciendo si está viva. No hay la posibilidad de rito, del duelo, de ir y llorar a tus muertos en un lugar y saber que ahí están descansando. (2025)

Through intimate dialogues, *Ruido* explores the nuances of grief within the context of disappearances, with particular focus on the complex position of mothers navigating their grief, considering Mexico's traditional gender roles. For instance, at a support group that Julia attends, one woman confesses that she cannot feel joy at the birth of a new grandson while her daughter remains missing, and the shame this makes her feel. Julia admits feeling quiet resentment toward her husband's kindness, aware that no amount of kindness can undo the loss of their daughter. Julia's growing distance from her husband and son, who are resentful of her decision to search for Ger, reflects the contradictory expectations placed on *madres buscadoras* within traditional gender roles. As mothers, society expects them to fulfil maternal expectations by looking for their children (to be a 'good mother'); yet, at the same time, it pressures them to remain in the private sphere, caring for their husbands, remaining present for their other children, or supporting their grandchildren (Zulver, 2023) (figures 26 & 27). As the family, traditionally a source of security and cohesion, begins to crack, *Ruido* underscores the increasing anguish faced by Julia, contributing to her feelings of isolation and helplessness.

Figure 26. *Ruido*, 0:27:08. Julia on video call with her son as he talks about his grief.

Figure 27. *Ruido*, 0:39:06. Julia resting her head against the door of her and her husband's bedroom, as he sits inside, unwilling to let her in, both physically and emotionally.

Figure 28. *Ruido*, 0:55:58. Julia shows Abril a video of Ger before their bus journey.

Like Huezo, Beristáin employs symbolic imagery to evoke a sense of foreshadowing and to heighten the emotional weight of loss. Throughout *Ruido*, photographs and videos of Ger serve as poignant reminders of Julia's persistent fear (of not seeing her again) and grief (figure 28). The video of Ger starkly contrasts with the sensationalised depictions of women who have been victims of violence, as it highlights her joy and vitality. In this way, *Ruido* emphasises a form of memory-

building grounded in human connection and care, preserving Ger's spirit in the face of her absence. Abril's young daughter, who appears early in the film when Julia and Abril first meet for coffee, amplifies Ger's absence, and she embodies both the looming threat of continued loss and the possibility of hope (figure 29). In this way, *Ruido* communicates the dangers women face without resorting to threatening or violent imagery. Instead, the film underscores the emotional toll of such loss by focusing on the intimate dynamics of maternal relationships.

Figure 29. *Ruido*, 0:21:00. Julia, Abril and Abril's daughter in a café. As they talk, the little girl plays between them in the background.

As Beristáin notes, one of the film's primary objectives is to 'ponerle cara al dolor, humanizar ese dolor y no dejarlo como, creo, que muchos de los medios y el gobierno intentan dirigir la narrativa: que les quitemos el rostro, que se convierta en cifras.' (2025). The director achieves this by fixing the camera on the observers of violence and making their emotional responses the centre of each violent episode. In the police station in San Luís Potosí, Julia and Abril study crime-scene photographs. Instead of showing the photographs themselves, the camera focuses on their reactions, emphasising their emotional impact (figure 30). When discussing this scene with me, Beristáin reflects, 'la representación (de mujeres asesinadas) no deja de parecerme violenta y patriarcal, sabes, en donde los cuerpos de las mujeres son instrumentos de consumo o se hace con ellas lo que los hombres generalmente dictaminan. Y eso era algo que sin duda no queríamos repetir.' (2025).

Figure 30. *Ruido*, 0:44:56. At the police station in San Luís Potosí, Julia and Abril look at a file of photos of women who have been victims of violence.

A similar cinematographic strategy is adopted in the pivotal moment when Julia enters the abandoned trailer containing the bodies of women who have been trafficked. During this scene, the frame lingers on Julia's face, while the light dims, and the insistent buzz of the flies conveys the sensory details of experiencing violence (figure 31). As Beristáin reflects: 'El horror está como en el marco, pero para afuera, es una cosa latente, es una cosa atmosférica pero no queremos mostrarla, no queremos hacer un hincapié en ello.' (2025). Similarly, when Abril is forcibly removed from a bus by armed officers on the way back from San Luís Potosí, we experience the horror from Julia's perspective, behind the windowpane (figure 32). By doing so, the shot simultaneously distances and confines the viewer, mirroring Julia's helplessness. These scenes invite the viewer to feel the weight of witnessing violence rather than just showing it, refusing graphic spectacle in favour of evoking affect. In this sense, Beristáin subverts the *pedagogía de miedo* (Berlanga Gayón, 2018) by foregrounding the perspective of women as witnesses to violence, encouraging a more empathetic mode of spectatorship grounded in emotional resonance rather than simply generating fear.

Figure 31. *Ruido*, 0:49:22. Close-up shot of Julia as she enters a trailer full of women's bodies who have been victims of sex trafficking.

Figure 32. *Ruido*, 1:20:40. Blurry shot from Julia's perspective as she watches Abril being dragged into a police car after being forcibly removed from the bus.

As the narrative unfolds, Julia's deepening involvement with the investigation increasingly exposes her to danger, mirroring the real-life risks linked to being in a colectivo or conducting personal investigations in Mexico. Like *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras*, Beristáin builds suspense by centring Julia's perspective, intensifying the viewer's anxiety for her safety. The sustained focus on Julia's emotional interiority prioritises a deeper engagement with her psychological reaction to violence, as opposed to inviting a heteropatriarchal gaze that reinforces the notion that women belong to spaces of violence (García-Del Moral, 2011).

To conclude, *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras* and *Ruido* foreground violence as an embodied experience, expressed through emotions such as fear, insecurity, and grief. Through their employment of various cinematic techniques - camera movements, sound design, and imagery - they generate affective tensions that resonate with the viewer and evoke a palpable atmosphere of violence. These techniques invite the audience to inhabit the protagonist's emotional worlds, fostering deeper engagement with their lived realities. Moreover, by centring the emotional dimensions of violence, the films reveal how fear shapes women's everyday lives, constraining mobility and undermining relationships, ultimately exposing how fear is weaponised within *las nuevas guerras*. Through intimate, embodied and everyday moments, these films contribute to feminist efforts to expand and complicate dominant narratives of violence. Their representations resist the sensationalism and desensitisation typical in mass media, instead rehumanising stories and encouraging meaningful reflection.

Chapter Four: Ethical Representation, Complex Gendered Agency, and Violence

For over two decades, annual surveys by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film have consistently shown that films directed by women are more than twice as likely to feature a female protagonist compared to those directed by men[15]. While male-directed films often reinforce entrenched gender stereotypes, female-directed works tend to interrogate and subvert them (Brandino, 2018). This pattern extends to Narco film, where films like *Heli* (Amat Escalante, 2010) and *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, 2024) make explicit use of violence and frequently portray women as passive victims, reinforcing harmful tropes and further marginalising Latina actors. Mainstream media coverage of GBV similarly invites a heteropatriarchal gaze that positions women as inherently 'targets' of violence and subordination rather than as autonomous agents. Against this backdrop, this chapter will explore the role of female filmmakers in providing counter-narratives, investigating how they spotlight women's agency over passive victimisation.

Drawing on the feminist film theory of collaboration (Hong, 2021), exemplified by the film collective *Cine Mujer,* which existed both in Mexico (1975-1987) and Colombia (1978-late 1990s), this chapter explores how directors Huezo, Calvo, and Beristáin centre the voices and stories of marginalised groups as a fundamental principle of their cinematic practice. This is especially critical when representing real stories of GBV, where questions of voice, agency and representation are inherently political, and for challenging the centrality of the director's subjectivity. Through personal interviews with Calvo and Beristáin, published interviews with Huezo, and an analysis of their production methods, I examine how each director employs ethically grounded and collaborative processes to foster more authentic and accountable forms of representation. I focus on their hybrid use of documentary and fiction techniques, which contributes to their collaborative production, analysing how these strategies expand narrative agency and explore how such agency may extend beyond the screen. Additionally, I will consider their employment of cinematic techniques, such as narrative structure and cinematography - particularly the use of handheld cameras, tracking shots, and

[15] The survey can be found at https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/

close-up portraits - cultivate affective proximity and narrative autonomy, thus challenging victimising narratives and contributing to alternative visions of female subjectivity in violent contexts.

This chapter will engage with the theory of *complex gendered agency* (Zulver, 2024), a framework that resists reducing women's emotions – and their capacity to mobilise action – to automatic or unreflective impulse, such as so-called 'maternal instincts'. Instead, it highlights the importance of situating women's agency within the violent conditions that shape, constrain and give rise to it, emphasising how such agency is critical and conscious. Specifically, the framework repositions fear by conceptualising it in relation to the potential for solidarity amid suffering (Zulver, 2024). That is: the fear that emerges out of contexts of violence can be overcome by the fear of not engaging in community. As Ana Villarreal (2015: 136) writes, fear 'may both tear the social fabric and bring people together, both destroy the public space and create new forms of social life.'

Feminist scholars have used the notion of care as a critical response to GBV, suggesting how it can be harnessed to overcome barriers to action (Zulver, 2024). This perspective also serves as a challenge to neoliberal policies, which rely on profit and production (De la Bellacasa, 2012; Lawson, 2007; Robinson, 2013; Zulver, 2024). Accordingly, I will discuss how *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras* and *Ruido* depict agency and resistance as grounded in the protagonists' and directors' ability to cultivate care and community amid the violence and social fragmentation. Ultimately, I argue that the creation, collaboration and representation of such networks constitute a political act, one that not only challenges the dominant portrayal of women as passive victims, but also directly resists the social disintegration wrought by *las nuevas guerras* (see Segato, 2014) as discussed in the previous chapters, which sustain conditions of GBV and render mobilisation seemingly impossible.

Noche de Fuego:

Noche de Fuego foregrounds the experience of girls and adolescents growing up in contexts of unrelenting violence in Guerrero, Mexico. In this setting, the young girls must navigate the complex process of forming their subjectivities while simultaneously coming to terms with their vulnerability as targets of violence. Positioned at the intersection of the personal, social, and political, these girls embody

the potential for reimagining young women's identities beyond the conventional victimising narrative. Director Tatiana Huezo underscores this political potential by framing the film through her perspective as a mother:

> La única forma en que yo podía aproximarme a esta historia era a través de mi propia búsqueda, de mi investigación sobre la infancia y de mis experiencias como madre, de una pequeña de nueve años a la que veo crecer cada día: que se hace muchas preguntas, y que empieza a tener muchos conflictos con el mundo (Huezo in Gatapardo, 2021).

Coming from a documentary background, Tatiana Huezo has spoken about how she applied the same methods she uses in nonfiction filmmaking when creating *Noche de Fuego*. One of the film's most distinctive features is its use of non-actors. The casting process, led by Grace Miguel Villanueva and Natalia Beristáin, lasted nearly a year and involved extensive searches across mountain towns. Huezo specifically sought out 'niñas del campo' (Huezo in Gatapardo, 2021) who could bring aspects of their lived experiences into the film. The young actors selected – Ana Cristina Gonzalez (age nine) and Mayra Membreño (age fourteen) as María, and Camila Gaal (age nine) and Alejandra Camacho (age fourteen) as Paula – underwent three months of preparation. With the guidance of renowned acting coach Fátima Toleda, they trained together, built trust, and developed genuine friendships. During their preparation, Huezo intentionally withheld the script from the girls and would not disclose who would play the lead, explaining that she wanted them to rely on their instincts and respond naturally to each scene (Huezo, 2022). As she put it, her approach was about 'starting from their own identities, finding the richness in the characters, kind of extracting what's already latent in them.' (Huezo, 2022). In this sense, by fostering the girls' sense of agency during the film's preparation and filming, and allowing them to act on instincts, Huezo refuses to portray them through an 'adult gaze' that so often objectifies children in film. The community of Neblinas, where the film was shot, also played a crucial role in the production, with locals appearing as extras. By employing these collaborative documentary techniques, the protagonists are encouraged to rely on intuition and life experience, thus enhancing the sense of realism and strengthening the emotional resonance of the film.

As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the film's aspect ratio is integral to representing the girl's point of view and their relationship to the world around them as coming-of-age female subjects in a violent heteropatriarchal society. The

aspect ratio subtly changes between the film's two time periods: the girls at age nine (aspect ratio of 1.66:1) (figure 33) and fourteen (1.78:1) (figure 34). In contrast to the first half of the film, which aims to convey the girl's separation from the adult world and sense of innocence, the second half captures more of the world around them by widening the aspect ratio. In doing so, they demonstrate the girls' transition into adult life, and consequently their closeness to violence. The use of a hand-held camera throughout the film creates a sense of closeness and brings the viewer to the girl's level, no matter what is going on around them. Therefore, Huezo and cinematographer Dariela Ludlow ensure that the film is grounded in the girl's perspective, drawing attention to their developing intuition and awareness of the world they inhabit.

Figure 33. Noche de Fuego, 0:50:23. Close-up shot of Ana with aspect ratio 1.66:1.

Figure 34. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:50:42. María running. First shot with aspect ratio 1.78:1.

Huezo's primary intention when writing the script for *Noche de Fuego* was to foreground the protagonists' criticality, intuitiveness and sense of selfhood:

> Mientras escribía el guión, me gustaba imaginarme a estas niñas como mujeres que cuestionan la violencia, el silencio y la inmovilidad del mundo adulto; mujeres que adquieren un pensamiento crítico a través de los maestros rurales que llegan al pueblo donde viven y que pueden incidir en su realidad de alguna manera, más allá de la tragedia que existe. En ningún momento quise mostrarlas como víctimas (Huezo in Gatapardo, 2021).

By characterising her protagonists as 'niñas semillas' (Huezo in RFI España, 2021), Huezo presents the coming-of-age subaltern subjects not as passive victims of their identities but instead highlights the process of their subject formation, which is rooted in resistance and critical consciousness. The first half of the film, which depicts the girls at age nine, is particularly notable for its nuanced portrayal of childhood. Huezo avoids romanticising or infantilising her characters, instead emphasising their perceptiveness and emergent intuition, which was aided by their lack of access to the script during pre-production. An early scene in which a military truck passes by, and María warns Ana and Paula, 'no los miren en los ojos,' acknowledges the girls' tacit understanding of the dangers they face and sets the tone for a narrative grounded in their perspective. Despite not being fully aware of their social and political marginalisation, Huezo highlights the potential force of the girls' quiet defiance against the authorities and, in turn, subverts the authoritarian gaze which seeks to victimise them.

This visual and narrative positioning is further emphasised by how their mothers try to shield them from the brutal realities of their environment. Their protective strategies, some of which I have previously mentioned, also include hiding their daughters in holes, teaching them to recognise sounds, cutting their hair, and preventing them from wearing make-up. Additionally, women in the village resist in more subtle ways by circulating gossip, and more overtly by organising resistance strategies. Informed by Hume and Wilding's arguments in their work on women's agency within violent settings (2019), despite appearing passive, the mothers' actions reflect that agency is a process rather than an end goal. Furthermore, when considering women's agency within violent environments, it is vital to situate their actions within the complex conditions of violence they live under. The mothers are engaging in everyday forms of resistance in relation to armed actors operating in their space.

In contrast, Huezo demonstrates how the girl's agency is more overt due to their lack of exposure to the conditions around them. However, she does not portray the girls as naïve or fearful. Instead, she emphasises their capacity for critical thought and resistance to imposed truths. For instance, when Ana visits her friend Juana's house and catches a glimpse of Juana's mother, bloodied and screaming, the encounter becomes a pivotal moment of revelation. Though Ana is later told that Juana and her mother had to leave the village together – a partial truth meant to protect her – she remains unconvinced. Her return to Juana's house, where traces of Juana's sudden disappearance remain – her flip-flops by the bed, her bicycle in the garden – serves as both an act of mourning and a form of inquiry (figure 34). By foregrounding Ana's persistence in seeking answers, Huezo highlights how she and her friends are motivated by a deep sense of care. Their youthful fearlessness stands in stark contrast to their mother's embodied fear, which gives rise to more cautious and strategic forms of resistance. The mothers' expression of agency – subtle acts of micro-resistance– are shaped by the constraints of their environment and may not always be recognised as overt expressions of care. Nonetheless, as the film progresses, Ana's mother appears more fatigued and depressed, highlighting the emotional toll that living in such extreme conditions of fear takes on one's ability to resist. In contrast, the girls' agency is more expressive and energised, reflecting their limited exposure to the nuances and consequences of resistance. *Noche de Fuego* thus portrays agency in violent contexts not as something eroded by fear, but as something that evolves in response to it over time. Furthermore, it must be understood in relation to the 'everyday scripts of violence' that colour the communities in which they live (Hume and Wilding, 2015).

Figure 34. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:25:45. Ana at Juana's house, as she places her feet next to her friend's flip-flops.

Figure 35. *Noche de Fuego*, 0:38:56. Ana, María and Paula hug each other during a game where they guess what the other is thinking.

Huezo foregrounds the political power of innocent play and community-building through the girls' games, such as one in which they close their eyes and guess each other's thoughts (figure 35). Framed as intuitive development and emotional bonding, these moments offer tools of protection and resistance. As feminist scholars like Krystalli and Schulz (2022) argue, expressions of love, care and relationality are vital to imagining life after violence – a theme that emerges as the

girls develop awareness through curiosity and play. This culminates in a poignant scene in the forest where they engage in a hypothetical conversation about their futures, as they place stones in the ground to represent their bodies. Ana asks, 'Oigan, ¿qué creen que nos pasa cuando una de nosotras se vaya?' Though no one responds, the question signals their growing insight into their vulnerability within the violent heteropatriarchal social order. Huezo thus politicises their curiosity and emotional resilience, powerfully contrasting their immediate precarity with the possibility of a future grounded in care, connection, and collective imagination.

As the girls reach the age of fourteen, they are forced to abandon the innocence of their childhood and confront the realities of their 'precarious life' (Butler, 2006). The onset of adolescence brings physical changes that heighten their vulnerability, especially as the village falls under the control of a new cartel, the *Margaritos*. As the adolescents cultivate a stronger sense of self and individuality, they also begin to confront the implications of occupying a 'disposable' female subject position within a deeply sexist, capitalist, and violently oppressive society (Wright, 2005). Such conditions also influence how they must resist, demanding from them expressions of *complex gendered agency* to overcome the fear that is infiltrating their lives. As a result, the girls' evolving sense of criticality and bodily awareness must be actively nurtured by those around them.

Their new teacher emerges as a crucial figure in this developmental process. As I have previously mentioned, many teachers come and go in the village. However, this one is dedicated to supporting the specific educational needs that such a violent context demands, such as critical thinking, self-determination, love and care. In one classroom scene, he places a chair upside down and invites a student to sit on it. Paula approaches the chair and turns it right side up before sitting on it. The teacher then remarks: 'hay muchas cosas en este pueblo que están de cabeza.' This symbolic exercise underscores the importance of challenging distorted social norms, encouraging students to resist passive acceptance and instead envision the possibility of transformation.

In another class exercise, students are asked to construct representations of their bodies using found objects and describe them. Ana begins by saying:

> Ana tiene dos ojos de maíz, uno blanco y uno azul. Tiene una nariz de colcha vertebral. Tiene por boca un broche rojo de cabello. Tiene de columna vertebral un

alacrán encerrado dentro de una botella. Su corazón está hecho con tres piedras de la montaña. Y manos tiene alambres. Y sus piernas con hojas de elotes. (figure 36).

This activity enables Ana to assert a sense of identity that is rooted in her relationship to her environment but not defined by the oppressive structures that govern it. In doing so, she begins to delineate between her humanity, her capacity for thought, emotion, and connection, and her imposed subaltern positionality as a female subject in a violent heteropatriarchal society. Furthermore, the fact that the teacher is the only male character who is not involved in the cartel, the military, corrupt or absent, is very important for developing the student's sense of trust in an increasingly fragmented society.

Figure 36. *Noche de Fuego*, 1:20:20. Figure Ana has made from various found objects.

Huezo reflects the girl's spirit of 'radical resilience' (Berry, 2022) against violence, which is generated through solidarity, in the film's final scene. After the cartel has taken control of the village and María has been abducted, Ana and Paula sit in a departing truck, and Ana closes her eyes to try to communicate with María (figure 37). This moment not only symbolises hope but also affirms the girls' growing emotional agency and ability to transcend their victimised subjectivity. Furthermore, Huezo's continued attention to the girls' relationships with each other, from

childhood into adolescence, reflects the power of community, care, and love in the face of violence.

Figure 37. *Noche de Fuego*, 1:45:06. Ana and Paula on the truck leaving their village after the *Margaritos* have taken over, and María has been kidnapped.

Luchadoras:

Luchadoras blends documentary realism and cinematic affect to reframe dominant visual narratives surrounding women in Ciudad Juárez. The film enters the world of its three protagonists, Lady Candy, Baby Star and Mini Sirenita, who are *luchadoras* in the Mexican tradition of *Lucha Libre*, and foregrounds their strength and resistance both inside and outside of the ring. While *Luchadoras* is situated within the documentary tradition, Calvo was self-reflexive about the constructed nature of cinematic representation. In an interview with me, the director notes how intention underlies every formal choice regarding representation, whether in fiction or non-fiction. A prime example is mainstream media and sensationalist documentary portrayals of Ciudad Juárez, which, as García-Del Moral (2011) and Berlanga (2015) argue, often reproduce a heteropatriarchal gaze that spectacularises female suffering and reinscribes violence as a gendered norm. In contrast, the visual intention of *Luchadoras* is to prioritise affective engagement and ethical representation. As Calvo articulated, one of the key motivations behind the making of the film was to challenge hegemonic framing and the idea that all women in Juárez are passive victims of violence: 'Somos Patrick y yo. ¿Qué queremos? Que el mundo

vea que Ciudad Juárez y las mujeres no son solo víctimas. Esa es la línea que nosotros queremos transmitir' (2025).

Within the context of modern-day Ciudad Juárez, *Lucha Libre*[16] emerges as a crucial site of self-expression and self-determination for women navigating conditions of extreme precarity. As Calvo highlighted in our interview, the documentary's narrative took shape after meeting the *luchadoras* of Juárez, who envision themselves as superheroes both inside and outside of the ring: 'son las superheroínas del día a día' (2025). This statement captures not only the elevated, almost celebrity status of the *luchadora* within Mexican popular culture but also underscores the ongoing struggle women face in resisting the pervasive force of machismo in their everyday lives. Furthermore, their identities as working-class, *mestiza luchadoras* position them in an inherently subversive position, challenging heteropatriarchal gender norms not only through their physical performance but also through their rejection of dominant ideals that confine women to motherhood and self-abnegation (Van Bavel 2021b).

Luchadoras blends observational documentary with fictional elements to underscore its central message: women in Juárez are not victims. This hybrid approach allowed the filmmakers to depict female resistance not only through reality but also through symbolic, cinematic representation. Significantly, the choice to withhold the protagonists' real names not only protects their privacy but also positions them as symbolic figures, representative of a broader female experience within a context of GBV. This idea is most apparent in Baby Star's character, who does not remove her mask at all, unlike the other women. As Calvo explained:

> Nosotros hacemos mucho uso de elementos ficcionales. De esta forma, conseguimos unos niveles cinematográficos en los que se pueden contar cosas que no se puede contar en la realidad. El hecho de, por ejemplo, sacar las luchadoras de la lucha libre y llevarlas a los sitios que representaban la violencia para las mujeres fue como un concepto que desarrollamos estando allí y que nos parecía fantástico (2025).

Shots of the women in the street (figure 38), by the border (figure 39) and in the desert (figure 40) symbolise their defiance of the heteropatriarchal systems that restrict their access and mobilisation. Such symbolic acts of protest and reclamation

[16] *Lucha libre,* a longstanding Mexican tradition, embodies entertainment, cultural expression, and national identity (Van Bavel, 2021b). Rising in popularity after the revolution, it reinforced hegemonic masculinity through male fighters, while working-class *mestiza luchadoras* defied heteropatriarchal ideals and expanded possibilities for female identity (Van Bavel, 2021a).

mirror those of a demonstration that takes place in the streets of Juárez, where women gather at night to protest feminicide and GBV (figure 41).

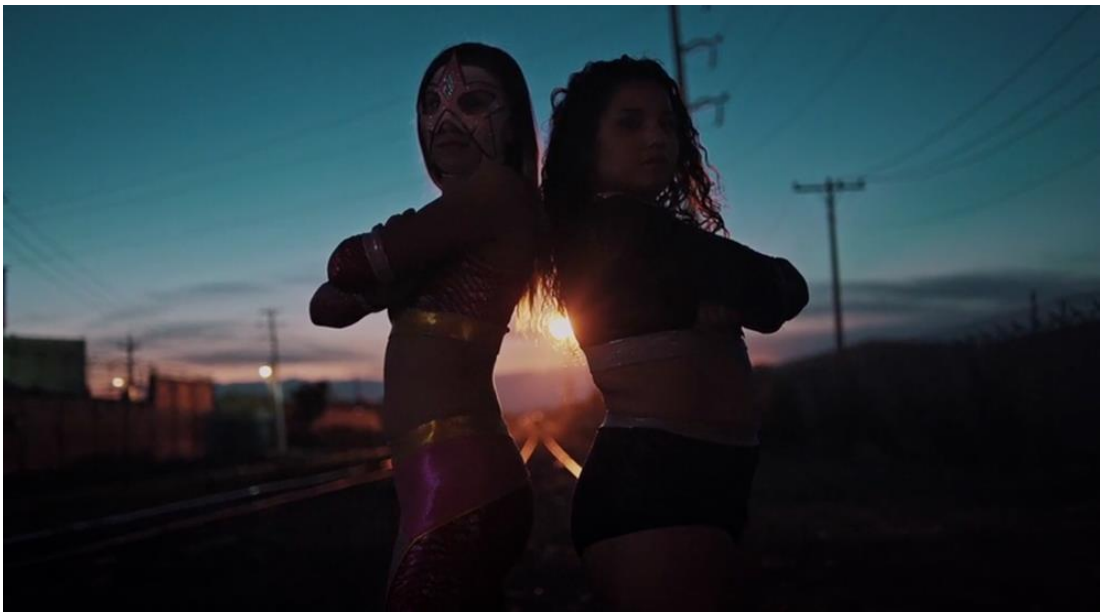

Figure 38. *Luchadoras*, 0:47:03. Baby Star and Lady Candy pose back-to-back in their fighting clothes in the streets of Juárez as the sun sets behind them.

Figure 39. *Luchadoras*, 0:41:42. Lady Candy defiantly walks past the U.S.-Mexico border fence in her fighting clothes. On the fence is written 'viv@s l@s queremos.'

Figure 40. *Luchadoras*, 1:27:36. Shot of the *luchadoras* walking defiantly across Juárez's desert landscape.

Figure 41. *Luchadoras*, 0:46:00. Shot of women riding their bikes through the streets of Juárez at night as part of their 'reclaim the night' protests.

In addition, rather than documenting the mechanics or traditions of *Lucha Libre*, the film embraces the spectacle as experienced by the audience, thus strengthening the image of the women as agents of resistance. Calvo elaborated on this in our interview:

> No nos dejaban mirar detrás de la cortina. Este es el espectáculo y esto es lo que hay, y a partir de aquí no podías entrar. Y, digamos, aceptamos las condiciones, porque para

> nosotras nunca se trató de retratar la lucha libre como tal. Nosotros no explicamos lo que es la lucha libra, no explicamos por qué empieza, no explicamos nada (2025).

While the ring remains a site of violence, it is simultaneously represented as a sacred space where women contest their subordinated status and articulate their anger. Fight sequences highlight the physical strength and endurance of the *luchadoras* while the close-up shots of their bloodied faces evoke not victimhood but defiance, as seen in the shot of Lady Candy (figure 42). These images suggest a reclamation of violence through female subjectivity, thus subverting the *encuadres del patriarcado* (Berlanga) that aim to instil fear in women. Moreover, given the personal stakes of this fight for Lady Candy, who intends to use her winnings to fund her visa to the US, this shot underscores her transformation of fear into action, marking an act of *complex gendered agency*. Here, violence becomes an emotional outlet; an expression of anger repurposed to mobilise and resist.

Figure 42. *Luchadoras*. 1:29:28. Close-up shot of Lady Candy's bloodied face holding her component's mask after winning her fight.

A particularly striking scene features Baby Star battling two male opponents as women in the audience cheer her on, shouting '¡otra!' each time she knocks them down (figure 43). Here, the *Lucha Libre* becomes a symbolic outlet for the collective frustrations of female spectators, transforming the ring into a communal site of resistance. As Calvo put it, 'el hecho de ir a la lucha libre, el hecho de estar juntos en la lucha es superimportante,' (2025), emphasising that in the face of fear and

violence, resistance and agency are intimately linked to solidarity and expression. Portraying women (and men) from Juárez - so often defined by their relation to violence - gathered in joy and community thus becomes a political act: an assertion of unity in defiance of the fear that seeks to divide them.

The film further underscores the transformation of symbolic resistance into collective action, as seen in scenes of schoolgirls being trained in self-defence (figure 44). These moments reframe the ring not just as a place for the spectacle, but for education and empowerment. One instructor underscores the significance of raising awareness among women about the gendered dangers they face: 'sexismo, machismo, cómo somos vistas como mujeres, cómo nos victimizan, cómo revictimizan y tal cual. También es super importante cómo empoderarse y sentirse empoderada.' These scenes foreground the significance of self-empowerment and collective resilience, while also exposing the pervasive systems of violence and machismo that characterise the lives of women in Juárez. Although *Lucha Libre* is not inherently political, *Luchadoras* reveals the profound role it plays for marginalised women in Juárez, thus reflecting how acts of resistance must be situated within the context of extreme GBV and social fragmentation.

Figure 43. *Luchadoras*, 0:31:40. Women shouting in the crowd during a wrestling match.

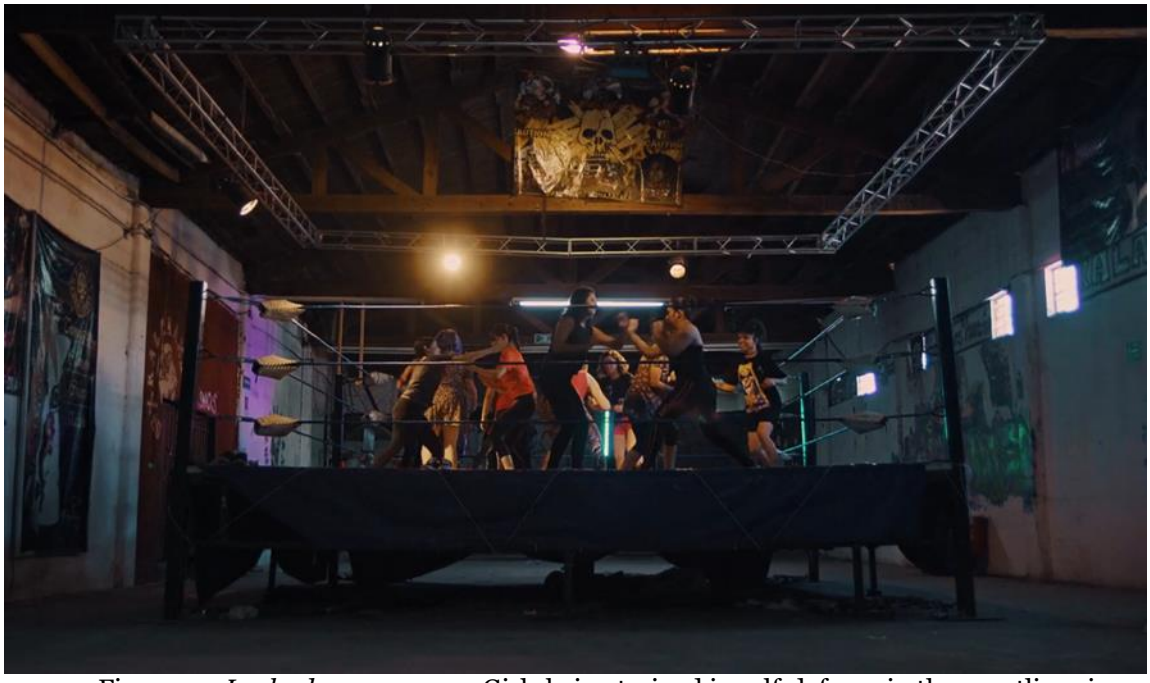

Figure 44. *Luchadoras*, 0:45:51. Girls being trained in self-defence in the wrestling ring.

Moreover, Calvo and Jasim's portrayal of the *luchadoras*' personal lives offers a compelling contrast to their performances inside the ring. Moving beyond the use of the spectacle and more fictionalised elements, the representation of their interior lives embraces what Calvo describes as 'cine personal' - a form of personal cinema that does not speak about its subjects, but with them: 'es una cinta que te lleva, que estás con ellas, que las sientas, que las conoces' (Calvo, 2025). The director notes how, to produce this form of cinema, they needed to establish a trusting and caring relationship beforehand.

While their performances in the ring showcase their physical strength and defiance, the film's intimate, observational framing of their offstage experiences invites the audience to witness another form of resistance, one rooted in the everyday. Within this space, the director allows the women's voices and routines to guide the story, fostering their sense of agency. Motherhood and the family are central themes. However, they are not depicted as a limitation for women, as Latin American societal expectations would have it, but as a space for transformation and agency, which emphasises women's futures rather than fears. Their representation as single mothers, who are economically independent, further fosters women's agency by proving that there are alternative options for future generations. Lady Candy's journey to reunite with her daughters is particularly emblematic. Her *lucha* ID helps her to secure a passport, and she hopes to fund her visa with prize money from her

next fight. Her maternal drive is underscored through shots of her repeatedly listening to voice notes from her daughters. This idea is reflected and reinforced by the closeness captured between Baby Star and her young daughter, who also wishes to become a fighter (figure 45). Similarly, Mini Sirenita is driven by her desire to go to Mexico City to fight and reunite with her daughter. In this sense, *Luchadoras* places a strong emphasis on the women's future possibilities and the future possibilities of other women, shifting the narrative from survival to self-determination. Through scenes of familial connection (figure 46), the film reveals how resistance and agency are woven into everyday joy, made more difficult by their circumstances, yet sustained by their willingness to shape their own and their families' futures.

Luchadoras combines fiction and reality to challenge the portrayal of women in Juárez as mere victims, highlighting everyday acts of resistance. While symbolic fictional scenes promote empowerment, the film's focus on the women's personal lives and the role of the *Lucha Libre* reveals a deeper, community-based defiance rooted in hope and joy rather than fear. Despite this, the future of the women is ambiguous, and, as my interview with Calvo revealed, there is little sustained contact with the *luchadoras* or suggestion of how the film may have impacted their lives.

Figure 45. *Luchadoras*. 0:37:45. Baby Star and her daughter in the park.

Figure 46. *Luchadoras*, 0:29:05. Mini Sirenita playing with her grandson.

Ruido:

Ruido explores the impacts of GBV and the crisis of disappearances in Mexico through the eyes of a mother whose daughter has been taken. While the narrative is rooted in the personal tragedy of Julia, it ultimately transcends the individual to reflect the collective experience of countless mothers across Mexico and the networks of solidarity that emerge out of the pain of losing a loved one. Like *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras*, *Ruido* illuminates the deeply gendered nature of activism and resistance in the country, where women, particularly mothers, continue to lead the battle against systemic impunity for human rights violations. In an interview with me, Beristáin reflected on this dynamic:

> ¿Qué pasa? Que son las mujeres las que toman más en sus manos esta actividad tan dolorosa. Hay algo en cómo hemos sido educados y educadas que hace que, otra vez, sean las mujeres quienes la asumen. Al final, es una especie de cuidado que ellas toman en sus manos: son quienes tienen el soporte emocional para salir adelante, para que la búsqueda genere esperanza y que no se quede solamente en la desolación que también atraviesan todos los días (2025).

A report by a Mexican human rights organisation identifies why it is usually women who search, primarily linking the phenomenon to traditional gender roles where women are carers and men are economic providers (Centro Prodh, 2020: 31). However, in an interview with Zulver (2024) for her work on fear and agency within the context of *madres buscadoras*, a woman shared that: 'the reason is machismo: in Mexico, the men are the kings of the house… some men have even told their wives to

stop searching so that they can take care of them instead' (February 15, 2022). Despite their central role, the contributions of mothers of the disappeared have often been marginalised in the development of international legal and political discourse (Palacio, Martínez & Góngora-Mera, 2025). This marginalisation stems in part from traditional views of motherhood as passive and apolitical. Adrienne Rich (2006) counters this narrative by framing motherhood as a site of political agency, where the act of mothering becomes a source of empowerment and collective resistance. Through this lens, maternal grief is not only personal but also a catalyst for public advocacy and societal change. Orozco Mendoza's (2019: 213) work on maternal activism recognises that 'when faced with institutions that disavow feminicide, the victim's mothers risked their own lives through bodily exposure and created communities of resistance that challenged dominant constructions of Mexican women as passive and docile.'

Ruido starts nine months after Julia's daughter, Ger, went missing, with Julia emotionally isolated and frustrated, as the official investigation has all but stalled. Julia seeks solace in a support group of relatives of the disappeared, which is composed predominantly of women. The space offers the opportunity for unrestricted emotional expression, where stories can be shared without judgment. The close-up camera shot invites empathetic spectatorship as the women give their testimonies, which are met with the affirming phrase 'no estás sola' (figure 47). As Cavril Tavris (1982) notes, such consciousness-raising spaces are crucial for challenging authority, as they reassure participants that they are neither alone nor misguided. Within this community, Julia finds renewed strength, and she returns to her husband, telling him, 'Hay que ir a buscarla una vez más.' Julia's pain becomes her source of strength, reflecting Zulver's (2024) assertion that expressions of injustice and outrage, when understood in relation to GBV, can be harnessed to overcome barriers to action.

Beyond Julia*, Ruido* introduces characters who embody the collective fight against GBV and amplify the film's emotional and political potential. One such figure is Abril Escobedo, a journalist who supports Julia in her search for her daughter. Inspired by real-life journalist-turned-activist Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, who pursued justice after her daughter's murder, Abril represents fierce resistance, and the risks journalists face in exposing state violence. Moreover, her maternal motivations are central: when Julia asks how she balances motherhood with such dangerous work,

she responds that it is for her daughter's sake – so she grows up knowing silence is not an option. This theme is echoed in Beristáin's own reflections on her motivations for creating *Ruido*, describing her decision to address themes of GBV and resistance as personal and political: 'Creo que convertirme en mamá también me situó en otro lugar, donde yo veo a mi hija crecer y me pregunto cómo le voy a explicar el país en el que vivimos, cómo va a ser su adolescencia' (2025). While the director has not directly experienced the disappearance of a loved one, she draws upon the emotional realities of being a mother in Mexico to express solidarity with those who have. In this way*, Ruido* becomes a tribute to the countless mothers for whom defiance is both a 'refusal to acquiesce' and an expression of 'dignity and personhood' in the face of oppression (Wood, 2003, p. 233).

Figure 47. *Ruido*. 0:17:40. Close-up shot of Julia after she has shared her story with a support group.

Similarly*, Ruido* presents activism and protest as a decision to overcome fear and fight for justice through solidarity, love and care. In doing so, it bolsters an image of women as active agents of change. In Mexico, protests, marches and public demonstrations are central to the anti-femicide movement, which favours changing political institutions by using outside pressure, as opposed to seeking representation within them (Webb, 2023). However, as Amnesty International highlights, these feminist demonstrations, though largely peaceful, are stigmatised as violent.

> The stigma faced by feminist demonstrations and protests against GBV is based on and reinforced by harmful gender stereotypes about women; that is, roles and concepts

> traditionally assigned to women. For example, the idea that women should stay home instead of making trouble for themselves by demonstrating, or that actions such as painting slogans, breaking down or targeting monuments, are not what women do (Amnesty International, 2021).

In contrast, *Ruido* affirms the legitimacy and emotional power of protest. It does so by incorporating protest scenes after moments of despair and isolation for Julia, highlighting their power as a space for collective healing and resistance (figure 48).

Figure 48. *Ruido*, 1:34:35. Wide-angle shot of Julia amidst a crowd of feminist protesters, who watch as one activist delivers a speech.

Although these protest scenes were staged, Beristáin cast real activists, grounding the fictional narrative in political struggles. For example, Liz, played by Jimena González, is an activist in the film and in real life. She and Julia meet whilst in San Luís Potosí, where Liz is protesting outside a government building in support of the family of a missing person who is seeking justice. She also wrote the speech that is read during one of the final protest scenes in San Luís Potosí, further embedding authentic demands into the film's fabric. Moreover, *Ruido* incorporates widely recognised protest chants such as '¡El estado opresor es un macho violador!' and '¡Hermana, escucha, tu causa es mi lucha!' The former chant, which originates from LasTesis' 'Un Violador' is integral to recognising Latin American feminist demands and underscoring Segato's (2003/2008/2014) argument that women's political agency against GBV is not possible within the state. Through these elements, the film aligns itself with activist discourse and practice, not just depicting rebellion but partaking in it. Furthermore, the cinematic medium enables a deeper

contextualisation of protest, framing it not as violent or illegitimate, but as a vital form of political expression in response to state failure. During our interview, Beristáin reflected on this point, discussing the film's resonance beyond the screen. At a Q&A, she recalled how a young girl shared that her film helped her family understand and respect her involvement in protests. The film also inspired future mobilisations: the square in San Luís Potosí, where the last protest scene was shot, had never been used for demonstrations before the shoot. After *Ruido*'s release, however, local activists began organising marches together there.

Equally integral to *Ruido*'s production are the collectives of *madres buscadoras* that Julia meets during her investigation. The two non-governmental organisations, *Voz y Dignidad por los nuestros San Luís Potosí* and *Colectivo buscándote con amor Estado de México*, worked collaboratively on the project, giving their time as actors, and in return having their voices and stories amplified. The former is a civil association that promotes a legal framework for the search for missing persons, along with the accompaniment of their families. One of the organisation's main search techniques is to search for clandestine graves in abandoned areas near the San Luís Potosí area. Similarly, *Colectivo buscándote con amor Estado de México* are a collective that helps in the search for missing persons. As Zulver (2024) argues, *the madres buscadoras* do political work: they exercise a particular type of *complex gendered agency* that both seeks justice in contexts of impunity and facilitates solidarity in contexts of social fragmentation. *Ruido* highlights the activism that these organisations do, portraying how women become their own forensic investigators in response to the negligence of the authorities (Cruz-Santiago, 2017) (figure 49).

Furthermore, the women's stories that emerge from conversations with Julia and during an interview with Abril are not fictional, but testimonies from their own lived experiences, expressing the immense pain they have experienced (figure 50). As Ahmed's (2004) work on pain suggests, women's testimonies about pain, testimonies of their experiences of violence, are crucial not only for the formation of feminist subjects (a way of reading pain as structural rather than incidental violence), but to feminist collectives, which have mobilised around the injustice of that violence and the political and ethical demand for reparation and redress (p. 172). Furthermore, as Ariza (2021: 161) argues, appeals to pain and a sense of injustice are a strategic resource for movements when they bring their social demands to the public arena,

partly because of the moral force that they carry. In this sense, *Ruido* serves as a platform for women to mobilise around their shared pain.

Figure 49. *Ruido*, 1:07:50. *Madres buscadoras* helping Julia into a potential clandestine grave.

Crucially, as well as addressing the pain experienced by these women as a form of resistance, *Ruido* also celebrates their joy and community spirit, as shown in a moment where they all dance together after their day's work (figure 51). For *madres buscadoras*, mobilisation is not solely about finding the missing family member; it is about showing love and care and searching for sources of solidarity in a high-risk setting where inaction does not guarantee safety (Zulver, 2024). Beristáin articulated how representing this sense of community was integral to the film's production:

> Haciendo la investigación de Ruido y trabajando de cerca sobre todo con los dos colectivos con las que trabajamos que fueron Voz y Dignidad por los Nuestros de San Luis Potosí y Buscándote con Amor del Estado de México, con ellas aprendí que la empatía, que la solidaridad, que el gozo, que la risa, que el hacer comunidad, incluso si esa comunidad se junta por un dolor que te atraviesa en lo común, todo eso es también un acto de rebeldía. Todo eso es no perder la esperanza. Todo eso es ir en contra del horror. Y para mí de eso se trata la película, porque si no es nada más como una historia que cuenta la violencia y de eso ya hay suficiente (2025).

Her words reflect those of Zulver: 'the ability to love and care fall directly under attack when family members are disappeared. Thus, finding new ways to resist this loss through the creation of new forms of solidarity can be considered a political act' (2024). *Ruido* does not speak on behalf of the collectives or the activists; rather, it

provides a platform to amplify their demands for justice and celebrates their ability to form connections amid fragmentation. It does not fictionalise or simplify their stories, as was the case in Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Peréz* (2024), but instead preserves their complexity and integrity by relying on their voices to tell the story. This collaborative relationship continued after the film was released, as both teams worked together to raise greater awareness through Q&As and presentations (Beristáin, 2025).

Figure 50. *Ruido*, 1:09:39. Close-up shot of a *madre buscadora*. The camera lens focuses on her face, and her surroundings are blurred.

Figure 51. *Ruido*, 1:11:26. *Madre buscadora* dancing.

Through a comprehensive analysis of *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras*, and *Ruido*, this chapter explores how female filmmakers in Latin America intervene in dominant representational paradigms by centring women's agency in narratives of GBV. Personal interviews with Calvo and Beristáin, along with published interviews with Huezo, indicate that their motivations are deeply rooted in affective and critical responses to the lived experiences of girls and women in Mexican society. Crucially, each director seeks to challenge their persistent misrepresentation as passive victims. By integrating their own lived experiences as women and mothers, coupled with an adherence to an ethic of collaboration, these filmmakers construct representations that foster solidarity and amplify voices that are so often silenced or misrepresented. Furthermore, they emphasise that agency, particularly within violent contexts, is complex, relational, and context specific.

Formally, all three films employ techniques such as close-up framing, observational camerawork, and the omission of explanatory voice-over to resist the objectifying patriarchal and adult gaze, thus cultivating a more affective and immersive mode of spectatorship. In *Luchadoras*, the integration of fictional elements reinforces the message that 'women are not victims.' At the same time, the documentary's narrative remains grounded in everyday life, illuminating how agency and resistance are deeply entwined with joy and community. Similarly, *Noche de Fuego* and *Ruido* locate resistance in acts of care, love and relational strength. By foregrounding these networks of solidarity, Huezo, Calvo and Beristáin underscore the political power of unity and community-building in confronting GBV. Ultimately, despite not being able to guarantee Mexican women's liberation, these filmmakers disrupt dominant portrayals of Mexican women and girls as passive or disposable, instead repositioning them as active agents of social transformation.

Conclusion

This project studies three contemporary Mexican female-directed films, *Noche de Fuego, Luchadoras*, and *Ruido*, and how they challenge dominant representations of GBV in the mass media and cinema. Having outlined some key reasons why such images are harmful - including that they obscure state accountability, utilise graphic and dehumanising imagery, and perpetuate victim-blaming narratives, all of which contribute to normalising women's position in spaces of violence and stripping away their agency - I propose that the films in my research offer intersectional, affective, and ethical representations, fostering a more critical engagement with stories of violence and promoting women's agency.

In chapter two, Structures of Violence, I argue that film is a valuable medium for understanding the structural and systemic conditions that give rise to GBV, reframing it as a societal rather than just a women's issue. By analysing *Noche de Fuego, Luchadoras* and *Ruido,* and their representation of the contexts of violence upon which they are based, informed by the work of Segato, Valencia, and others, the chapter reveals how GBV is embedded within a broader web of violence driven by heteropatriarchal, neoliberal and narco-capitalist structures. These films expose not only the physical toll of feminicide and disappearances, but also of its enabling conditions, such as impunity, forced labour, displacement, militarisation, institutional misogyny, and economic insecurity. Furthermore, to varying degrees, they illuminate how GBV becomes normalised through the transmission of a 'pedagogy of cruelty' which increasingly limits resistance. Amid state impunity, institutional negligence, and legislative fragmentation - reproduced in media narratives - these films illuminate the interwoven nature of GBV and the systemic conditions that sustain it. In doing so, they advance feminist efforts to make the state accountable for rising levels of GBV and further empower audiences with the conceptual tools necessary for meaningful advocacy.

In chapter three, Atmospheres of Violence, I explore how it might be possible to engage with stories of GBV without sensationalising, exploiting, or naturalising women's suffering. Drawing on feminist conceptualisations of embodied violence and Ahmed's phenomenological understanding of affect, I investigate each film's creation of 'atmospheres of violence' which immerse viewers in the protagonist's experiences of internal suffering. My analysis shows that, rather than reinforcing the *pedagogía de miedo* (Berlanga Gayón, 2018), the films under discussion subvert it,

representing women's embodied experiences of fear, distrust, unsafety, and grief. I conclude that such affective representations are critical for fostering emotional engagement with stories of violence and demonstrating how such emotional responses, specifically fear, can be weaponised to perpetuate social fragmentation and hinder mobilisation in Mexico's contemporary conflicts. Furthermore, by foregrounding the private and personal realms of their protagonists, the films shed light on the long-term, invisible impacts of violence on the social fabric. Through this affective and embodied lens, Huezo, Calvo, and Beristáin reestablish frameworks for ethical engagement with stories of violence. Their work resists the sensationalism and desensitisation typical of mass media, instead encouraging meaningful reflection on what it means to live within a context of extreme violence. Moreover, their abstract and affect-driven representations commemorate stories of violence in a way that invites critique of the structural conditions that gave rise to them.

In the closing chapter, Ethical Representation, Complex Gendered Agency and Violence, I consider how each film challenges the patriarchal gaze of mainstream media, which often positions women as passive victims of violence. I argue that these films resist such framing by fostering ethical representation and articulating *complex gendered agency*. Central to this is their collaborative production strategies - particularly the involvement of non-actors, activists, and grassroots organisations - which decentralise directorial authority. Such methods are crucial when portraying stories of GBV, as they help to avoid trivialisation or exploitation of suffering, instead foregrounding solidarity, activism and emotional resonance. By collaborating closely with the protagonists and their communities (including activist networks and organisations), Huezo, Calvo, and Beristáin more authentically depict resistance and agency, rooted in acts of care, empathy, and community. In doing so, they recast Mexican women not as passive victims of violence but as political agents of change.

I recognise the limitations of my research, particularly in its capacity to predict or influence social responses to femicide and disappearances. While I have highlighted how *Noche de Fuego*, *Luchadoras*, and *Ruido* offer alternative representations of GBV, there is no guarantee that these cinematic interventions will translate into tangible societal change. A key constraint lies in the subjective nature of my analysis, which did not incorporate the perspectives of a broader, more diverse audience. Moreover, except for *Ruido*, which collaborated closely with grassroots organisations and demonstrated sustained involvement and activism post-release, it

remains unclear how *Noche de Fuego* and *Luchadoras* have impacted the lives of the girls, women and communities depicted. These gaps underscore the need for further research in the role of cinema as a medium of political, social, and cultural resistance in contexts of violence.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the field of affect theory and its representations of GBV, particularly its capacity to challenge spectacularised and exploitative portrayals of violence. More broadly, it demonstrates how affect theory can be mobilised within film studies to uncover embodied and invisible forms of violence that are often overlooked in dominant narratives, thus encouraging deeper reflection on the enduring, unseen impacts of war and violence. Furthermore, by mapping Mexico's intricate web of violence and foregrounding affective responses to it, this research affirms the potential of film as a powerful tool for reimagining safer futures for girls, women and other oppressed groups, futures grounded in care and collective agency, rather than a dependence on state structures.

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