

Victims of necropower? The construction of the feminine body in Mexican cinema about narco trafficking

¿Víctimas del necropoder? La construcción del cuerpo femenino en el cine mexicano sobre narcotráfico¹

Gabrielle Pannetier-Leboeuf

Universidad de Montréal, Montréal, Canadá - Universidad de la Sorbona-París IV, París, Francia
gabrielle.pannetier.leboeuf@umontreal.ca

Abstract

The present article aims to give hints on the ways by which the masculine power emanating from narcotraffic has an influence on the images of the feminine body in the Mexican feature film *Miss Bala*, directed by Gerardo Naranjo (2011). The example of the short-film *El otro sueño americano*, directed by Enrique Arroyo (2004), will also be presented in order to introduce the analysis of *Miss Bala* and show that the violence exercised on the feminine body in Naranjo's movie is far from being an isolated case. This research will analyze how the woman's body is presented in those films as a space of expression of the patriarchal necropolitical domination associated with the violence that emerges from narcotraffic. The paper will explore more specifically in which ways Naranjo's movie limits the feminine character's control over her own body and by doing so perpetuates certain archetypical gender representations despite its aspiration to denounce the abuses suffered by women. However, the essay will also underline that certain acts of resistance undertaken by the protagonists of both films can reveal strategies that, although unsuccessful, do present the existence of an agency for the feminine characters.

Keywords

Necropower; narcotraffic; feminine body; agency; Mexican cinema.

Resumen

El presente artículo pretende dar pistas sobre las maneras en que el poder masculino emanado del narcotráfico influye en las imágenes del cuerpo femenino en el largometraje mexicano de ficción *Miss Bala* de Gerardo Naranjo (2011). El ejemplo del cortometraje *El otro sueño americano* de Enrique Arroyo (2004), será también presentado para introducir el análisis de *Miss Bala* y mostrar que la violencia ejercida sobre el cuerpo femenino en la película de Naranjo es lejos de ser un caso aislado. Se analizará cómo el cuerpo de la mujer es presentado en estas obras a manera de espacio de expresión de la dominación patriarcal necropolítica asociada a la violencia surgida con el narcotráfico. Más específicamente, se explicará de qué maneras se puede considerar que la película de Naranjo limita el control que tiene el personaje femenino sobre su cuerpo y perpetúa en este sentido ciertas representaciones arquetípicas de género a pesar de su aspiración denunciadora de los abusos sufridos por las mujeres. Se reconocerá sin embargo que ciertos actos de resistencia emprendidos por los protagonistas de ambos productos cinematográficos pueden en el fondo traducir estrategias que, sin ser exitosas, sí apuntan hacia la existencia de una agencia en los personajes femeninos.

Palabras clave

Necropoder; narcotráfico; cuerpo femenino; agencia; cine mexicano.

1. Introduction

In Mexico, annual revenue generated by narco-trafficking is estimated at 150 billion dollars (Valenzuela, 2002). Although narco-trafficking is an important part of this informal economy, its influence on society and the Mexican cultural scene is no less real, which proves the existence of a violence and an ostentation inspired in the narco aesthetic in different artistic productions. The importance that narcopower has on the imaginary is such that it is currently found in a number of cultural manifestations that belong to what's called narcoculture (Sibila & Weiss, 2014), whether it is in literature (García-Niño, 2013), in song (Valenzuela-Arce, 2002), in architecture (Rivelois, 1999), and even in fashion (Heau-Lambert, 2014). Cinema on narco-trafficking can be considered also a new genre among the artistic and commercial expressions of narcoculture.

In various regions of the country, among which are Michoacan, Veracruz and the US border, this narco-violence has increased drastically in the last decades. In northern Mexico specifically, the situation has affected women in a particular way; between 1993 and 2010, only in the state of Chihuahua, more than 500 women have been killed and more than 1,000 have disappeared (Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010: 6). The phenomenon has become so alarming that they have created a neologism *femicide* (Lagarde & de los Ríos, 2010; Radford & Russell, 1992) to describe this new reality. Over time, a parallel relationship has been confirmed between the increase in femicide—the majority of which go unpunished (Pantaleo, 2010)—and the multiplication of activities of drug cartels in the areas along the U.S. border. (Gonzalez-Rodríguez, 2002).

Motion pictures like feature film *Miss Bala* (2011) by Gerardo Naranjo and the short film *El otro sueño americano* by Enrique Arroyo make an issue of, each one in its own way, the presence and representation of the body and the feminine identity in said context of misogynic violence of Mexico. In the following pages, we will discuss the entire cinematographic

product by Naranjo and the thematic, formal and aesthetic treatment of the feminine lead character Laura Guerrero. The specific analysis of *El otro sueño americano* will feed our reflections regarding the violence and will serve as a comparison in the study of feature films by Naranjo, letting us see that patriarchal violence sensed in *Miss Bala* is not an isolated case. Although the violence in the last years has devastated many regions and cities in Mexico, not just in the north. We chose two works whose plots are situated precisely on the U.S. border because we consider that they share a certain imaginary particular to the border area (dynamics associated to trafficking, promises of a new, anonymous life) that have a considerable incidence in the treatment of the questions of violence and gender.

2. Approach to the problem

For the thematic analysis of the film by Naranjo, our theoretic framework is multidisciplinary and comes from cultural and sociological studies and gender studies. The concept of *necropower*, which is the combination of powers of death or life that are exercised on a group or a population (Mbembe, 2003), is central to our analysis and, revisited with a focus on gender questions, allows us to explore how traffickers in both films impose their power of death on feminine characters. Indeed, by treating women as disposable beings that are at their disposal and that have no worth, the traffickers and police officers apply a violence over female characters that corresponds to what Mbembe (2003) calls *necropower*. This power, instead of referencing the power that the state or a group has of making a population live or letting them die, such as the case of biopower theorized by Foucault (1976: 177-191), rather it alludes to the power of making them die or letting them live (Mbembe, 2003: 41-47) and he gives a group the ability to decide who is important and who isn't, who can live and who must die.

3. Masculine "Point of view"

For formal analysis, we used a methodology of feminist filmic theories that correspond to the question of the agency. Our research follows the proposals by Mulvey (1975) regarding the fact that cinema is dominated by a masculine "point of view" to analyze the representation of women as objects for viewing. Given that theories by Mulvey have been widely reviewed, corrected and improved, we also took advantage of the methodological approaches of the feminist analysts that followed Mulvey starting in the 80s like Creed (1987) to criticize the oppression of women via formal cinematographic resources used. Therefore, our analysis subscribes methodologically to a line of redeeming the female protagonist on screen, proposing, however, reading the contempt towards women using a new socio-historic context: that of narcoviolence and recent femicides in Mexico. Of course, we are aware that the progress in gender analysis in cinematographic studies during the last decades has opened many interpretive perspectives that go beyond those coined by Mulvey. For this reason, what we intend to do here is only explore one of the many possible lines of analysis of the body chosen, and likewise inquire as to which proposals by Mulvey on oppression present in formal cinematographic are still valid, or not, today.

4. Synopsis of the works studied

The main object of study of this work, the fiction feature film *Miss Bala* (2011) is a drama directed by Gerardo Naranjo, co-written by Mauricio Katz and produced by Canana Films and 20th Century Fox. *Miss Bala* tells the story of Laura, a young Mexican from the border city of Tijuana that dreams of winning the Miss Baja California pageant to escape poverty. During a shootout in a nightclub, Laura is separated from her friend Azucena, and begins to search for her. During this process, she goes to the police but they take her to La Estrella, the drug cartel responsible for the shooting. Laura ends

up kidnapped by the leader of the group, who will use her to carry out different missions involving his illegal activities. The plot is based on the true case of Laura Zuñiga Huizar, who won the titles of Miss Sinaloa and Miss Hispano-america in 2008 before being arrested in December of that same year together with 7 men in possession of two assault rifles (Santamaría-Gomez, 2012: 66).

The movie *El otro sueño americano* (2004) that will serve as transition for the analysis of Miss Bala by introducing key elements of violence on the female body on the Mexico-U.S. border. It's a 10-minute short film that premiered at the Morelia International Film Festival. It was directed by Enrique Arroyo and produced in collaboration with the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA), by Costachica Producciones and the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE). *El otro sueño americano* recreates the physical and verbal violence suffered by a young adolescent prostitute from Chiapas arrested near the border for possession of a small amount of cocaine (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 710). Her American dream quickly fades when she realizes that the police of the Procuraduría General de la República that are taking her away in their patrol car intend to give her to an former soldier in the US Army, Timoteo, who traffics people.

5. *El otro sueño americano*: the female victim of violence as an object of necropower

Although cinematographic reproduction of this misogynist and necropolitical violence on women's bodies plays a certain role in denouncing, at the same time it encloses female characters in a passive role, considerably decreasing their agency (Butler, 1990), which is to say, their ability to act on their own and make decisions as active subjects. From this perspective, this unambiguous treatment of male-female relationships in the two works selected can lead to a problematic representation of

feminine characters like systematic victims of gender necropolitics (Wright, 2011:709) of the border zone.

In this sense, the 10-minute duration of the short film *El otro sueño americano* is full of physical and psychological violence directed at young Sandra. El judicial, Genaro, calls her "whore", "bitch", "dumb", "damn woman", "asshole", "pig", he gives her cocaine, he hits her and encourages her to practice fellatio (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 571). Plus, he handcuffs her to the car, sadistically obligating her to hear the atrocities that the men she is being given to will do to her. While Sandra cries, Genaro tell her, also in detail, what happened to another woman when these same men tortured her before killing her. The film ends with the sale of Sandra to the American Timoteo and makes it clear that there is no other escape for her except for rape, torture, and death.

The entire short film is filmed with the same frame, presenting the lead character only from the point of view of the instrument panel of the police car. While the discourse and insults of the driver fill the audio, the fixed frame centered on the woman allows you to see each one of her reactions to what is happening. In this case, the frame contributes, due to its fixedness, to enclosing the female character on the screen, like another prison impossible for her to escape. Said treatment of the camera, that recreates the oppression of the woman by the formal resources and the suffocating atmosphere that adds to the violence of the dialogues, anchors the violence to the character's body as well as the filmic material. Moreover, the fact that the point of view is oriented towards Sandra and not on her interlocutor emphasizes the critique of Mulvey (1975), for whom the domination of cinema by a masculine point of view alters the images of the woman, presenting her as object for the male gaze and not as a subject¹. The immobility of the plane and the fixed angle refer also on the metaphorical plane to the violent and unshakeable violence by women on the border (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 579).

Plus, the frequent interruption of planes by "static" or white noise characteristic of blank VHS tapes suggests that the cut we see could be the result of an amateur filming done in the diegesis with improvised or low cost film equipment, which can also be deduced by the poor image quality and the overexposure of the photography (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 578). This particular aesthetic of the image insinuates that the character itself is filming the young girl that he is carrying prisoner in his car, which alludes to the snuff phenomenon in which people are tortured, raped or killed in front of the camera.

6. Miss Bala and the insistent presence of the feminine body: the reduction of the character to its body

In light of this example of narco masculine oppression on a woman, perceptible in both the narrative plot as well as the short film's aesthetic, it is now time to explore how narcoviolence is perceived by our main object of study, the feature film *Miss Bala*. In this section, we will explore in which ways the character of Laura is reduced on various occasions to her body. First we will study the emphasis placed on her body as well as by the discourse of the narco traffickers and by the type of planes in the image. Then, we will present the objectifying techniques of eroticization of this body, before finally addressing the strategies of instrumentalization of Laura's body by the group of traffickers and the resulting relegation of the female body to the *bare life* theorized by Agamben (1998).

6.1. The body in the center of the image and discourse

In *Miss Bala*, Laura Guerrero, the main character, is forced to have undesired sexual contact with Lino Valdez, the leader of the group of narco traffickers known as La Estrella. Lino

promises to help her find her friend Azucena ("Suzu") and also use his contacts to help her get into the beauty pageant. To a certain degree, Lino robs Laura of control over her own body as well as the possibility to do as she so pleases. In the movie, in addition to being used as a sexual object, Laura also sees her body become an economic tool by the narco-traffickers. Lino makes her carry out the work of a "mule", which consists of carrying money and illegal merchandise from one country to another. The mule has to first cross the border between Mexico and the U.S. with stacks of bills under her clothes and return to Mexico with boxes full of firearms. Laura's body also serves the purposes of the criminal group when her physical beauty, her youth and her recently acquired title of Miss Baja California are used to seduce General Salomon Duarte, a military officer on the police force who Lino's henchmen try to kill.

The triple instrumentalization of Laura's female body as a sexual tool, as a mechanism or vehicle for transporting money to the United States and engaging in illegal commerce, as well as an object of seduction and attraction, seems to point towards a certain lack of agency in the female character in regards to the disposition of her body in the film by Naranjo (Molina-Lora, 2013: 236, 241-243). The work even ends with Laura's capture by the military, as a member of the group La Estrella, and with her liberation in a remote, unidentified place. Despite not knowing with any certainty what will happen to Laura, it is presumable she will not find a happy ending, but will rather remain subject to the necropower placed on her by the narco-traffickers in collaboration with the police in the border area.

Along these same lines, you could also argue that the formal cinematographic resources of Naranjo's film emphasize the loss and the dilution of her identity in hands of the narco-traffickers. Indeed, the fact that the camera avoids Laura's face and that the staging hides her in the initial frames as well as in the last frame points to the robbing of the main character's identity (Colin-Rodea, 2014: 433-434) which

accompanies her transformation into Miss Baja California and in parallel, her submergence into the Tijuana's world of misogynist crime. For example, in the first three minutes and thirty-four seconds of the film, Laura's face is hidden, whether by other elements in the diegetic space situated in the foreground, by camera angles that show her back or profile, by the frequent cuts of the upper part of her body by the frame or by her looking at the ground. By blocking access to the main character's face during this entire first sequence, the staging impedes the audience from entering into a relationship with Laura, given that the face is generally the port of entry to intimate experience. The fact that the main character's face is shown for the first time on the screen only after the beginning of the film can have a foreshadowing effect of the threat of identity erasing that hangs over Laura with the narcoviolence that she will experience.

The formal insistence on the body of the young Mexican girl gives a glimpse of Laura's character's reduction by the narco-traffickers to its flesh wrapping and the impact the narcoinfluence has on her body. Indeed, in some key sequences in the movie, the camera stops on some close-ups on parts of the character's body, like when Laura is getting ready to get in the shower. At this moment, the camera reveals the ecchymosis that she has on her left buttock (38:17). The camera also shows the character's body when it shows her abdomen wrapped in tape (51:38, 52:18). In these frames, the feminine body visually fills a large part of the shot, which also places it in the center of the audience's attention. What is formally suggested and visually perceived is by the audience in these examples is the identity of the female character of Laura is reduced to her body by the narco-traffickers and that it is mainly via this body that they exercise power over her.

The fact that Lino and the group La Estrella refuse to see Laura as something more than an object and a female body is also confirmed verbally by the narco-trafficker: the most symptomatic discursive manifestation of this body enclosure is Lino's constant use of the

name "Canelita" to refer to Laura. In addition to using the diminutive "ita" as to underestimate Laura in front of the men of the criminal group, Lino gives superimposes a made-up name, Canelita, on Laura's real name, which he refuses to recognize. Upon doing so, it discursively imposes on Laura an identity that encloses her in her body, defining her only by her physical attributes, in other words, her cinnamon-colored skin, and reducing her to a produced aesthetic, once again, for the male gaze.

6.2. Male gaze on eroticized body

This cinnamon colored body to which Laura is reduced to, on various occasions, eroticized by el staging, that appeals to the sensorial reactions of the spectator insisting on the sensuality of Laura's body. The aesthetic decisions regarding formal treatment of Laura's body leave in the air the impression of a fixed masculine and patriarchal view (*male gaze*, cf. Mulvey, 1975) on her. More than once, like when Laura takes off her robe to put underwear on, the view induced by the camera is objectifying: a vertical ascending panorama lets the audience observe almost her entire body from the back, from her knees to her shoulders (49:43). The audience is invited to observe a young woman the way the leader of the narcotraffickers does and to adopt his view full of patriarchal patterns. Upon adhering to this gaze, the spectator is also brought to feel the weight of his own man's gaze on Laura to better perceive the dangerous situation and worry about the sexual vulnerability which the main character is in regarding Lino.

In this respect, it is necessary to ask what the *Miss Baja California* beauty pageant sequences represent. This contest involves contestants that show off in turns before the audience in a bathing suit and a suggestive dress. It is an issue of the transformation of the woman in object and the reduction of her body. It is precisely the group of narcotraffickers La Estrella that ends up pulling the strings in this contest and use their influence so that Laura

is declared winner, which is evidence of the omnipresence of narcopower in Mexican institutions, including in those that transform a woman into an object. Once crowned, Laura is defined and introduced to Mexican society, the media and General Salomon Duarte above all for being *Miss Baja California*. Also, based on the experience of the beauty contest, the audience is brought to form its first opinion of the character now with the title² of the film, *Miss Bala*, and likewise from the front cover of the DVD, in which the young Mexican woman is presented with high-heels, dressed in a bikini and wearing the beauty pageant crown and Miss Baja sash. This image clearly points to the narcoaesthetic cliché of the *Miss* companion of the narcotrafficker or *trophy-wife* that allows him to exhibit his power and virility (Santamaria-Gomez, 2012: 63, 64, 69), clichés shared in the narco imaginary that are both Mexican and Colombian.

6.3. Body, instrumentalization and bare life

The fact that Laura is reduced to a body by Lino and his group relegates the character to the *bare life* questioned in first place by Hannah Arendt (1951) and later by Giorgio Agamben (1998), which is to say, a life without value of the individual which groups exercising power do not recognize it as anything more than a biological life, but they deny it a political life. From the perspective of those that exercise their power over them, these individuals reduced to their body and their physiological existence can consequently be assassinated without any punishment or see their body instrumentalized while denying them of any civil rights (Agamben, 1998: 18). In the case at hand, the group La Estrella gives itself the power to decide the value of human life, to decide who can be relegated to the bare life and see their life and their body instrumentalized based on interests of the narcotrafficking group.

As Laura is obligated to have sexual contact with the leader of the group of the narcotraffic-

kers La Estrella, the audience is brought to contemplate the helpless way that Laura submits herself to the carnal desires of Lino. It even occurs that the staging artificially added a sensation of sexual coercion to certain images including when this connotation was absent from the narrative plot. For example, when Laura dresses the wounds on Lino's leg, the camera angle presents her from the view of the spectator from the back, on her knees before the trafficker who is not wearing a shirt, as if she were about to practice fellatio on him, which the audience perceives as a uncomfortable physical approximation (Bongertman, 2014: 43-44). From a approximation point of view, Lino is often particularly close to Laura, including when they are in spaces that are rather large⁴, which also consolidates the sensation of suffocation imposed on the main character by the criminal's physical presence.

The body of the character is also reduced by Lino to a biological body that is subject to the *bare life* and which the narco trafficker can abuse sexually. It is also instrumentalized for strategic purposes. This instrumentalization derives in fact from a widely-used phenomenon in narco environments, that Bongertman calls "the body ethics of narcoculture" (2014: 42), phenomenon by which the narco traffickers share a common view of the moral acceptability of instrumentalization of the female body for their activities. In this sense, the director of *Miss Bala* has confirmed in interview that the mistreatment suffered by the female character Laura are central to the film and are the representation of patriarchal patterns used by Mexican society: "The way women were treated in the town where I grew up was definitely wrong—in fact, *Miss Bala* has a lot to do with this concept of women as just tools to be used" (Mongrel Media, 2011: 11). The official Mexican poster of the film, in which you see the main character in a bra, hands behind her head, calls attention to the total vulnerability of the young protagonist as well as her loss of independence to the necropower of the criminal group.

The frames in which Lino wraps Laura's abdomen rubbed in oil with various layers of adhesive tape in order to later stash the US dollars makes the audience feel the oppression experienced by Laura, with close-ups that last respectively 29 (51:38) and 18 seconds (52:18) on her abdomen and with the evil sound of the tape being torn off and that fills the soundtrack at that moment. The dozens of layers of tape that Lino wraps around Laura's body also consolidates the impression that the torture experienced by the main character's body gets worse and worse. In addition, the stacks of bills taped to Laura's body visually anchor the character is its exclusively economic and utilitarian role in the eyes of the narco trafficker.

Beyond the diegetic universe, you could ask whether the director Gerardo Naranjo and his film crew did not instrumentalize the body of actress Stephanie Sigman themselves to increase movie sales both domestically and internationally. Indeed, the audience is questioned by the estheticized presentation Naranjo makes of Sigman's body in the film and by the image of the young, attractive woman's body of the actress in a bra on the *Miss Bala* Mexican poster, which suggests that the instrumentalization of the female body for economic purposes will not be exclusive to the diegesis, but rather would also take place in the profilmic space and spectatorial as well.

7. Sex, escape and... agency?

However, it seems necessary to us to provide a few details to the arguments previously mentioned to avoid re-victimizing female characters in our own analysis, which would be falling into the same dynamic of feminine disempowerment that we are denouncing.

Thus, although it is certain that neither Laura, nor Sandra manage to escape the dangerous situation placed on them by the narco traffickers it's important to note that neither of the

two is a passive person. In both cases, it is more the economic and social conditions in which they live that limit their possibilities of action.

In fact, you can also read some of the actions carried out by these women regarding their their oppressive environment like demonstrations of their agency, reviewing in this case the concept of feminine agency to include in it not only manifestations of real capacity of action (in this case, being successful in getting out of an undesired situation with violent men), but also the attempts and the strategies used to do it, although later these do not work.

In this sense, in *Miss Bala*, Laura escapes out the window during the shootout at the night club at the beginning of the movie (13:10). She tries to get away from Lino's right hand man by using the backdoor of the venue at the beauty pageant (31:16). She decides to stay with the drug traffickers in exchange for her father and brother's safety (41:01). She doesn't contact her father or brother using the cellphone that the criminal group gave her (1:12:36) – despite the interdiction formulated by Lino that she should speak to her family – and decides to go alone to the beach after the beauty contest (1:18:40), although she eventually returns to the trafficker's truck and accepts sexual activity with him. She also warns in a low voice to General Salomon Duarte that they are trying to kill him and that they are listening in on their conversation (1:39:29) (foiling the plans of Lino and his men. These attempts at escape and acts of rebellion by the young woman from Tijuana are not sufficient to change the course of events but at least show the intelligence and will of Laura to creatively and persistently resist narcoviolence (Molina-Lora, 2013: 241).

The mere fact that she wants to participate in the Miss Baja Contest and use her body as a "resource" to get her out of poverty alludes Laura's body is not exclusively subject to, but that she also perceives it as a possibilitizing agent, a tool, a capital, or another means to opening doors to a new life and improving

her situation (Molina-Lora, 2013: 241) as long as, however, it agrees with the narcocultural principles in which "the body of women and crime of men are valid ways to leave poverty behind" (Rincon, 2013: 22).

In terms of Sandra, in *El otro sueño americano*, she also uses a few strategies to achieve her liberation, although they all fail. Plus, trying to negotiate and convince the driver to let her go, trying to get out and run (3:47), demonstrating that she is willing to act and try anything in order to leave, before finally crying and begging Genaro to set her free.

Even the act of fellatio that she gives Genaro in a desperate attempt to buy her freedom could be seen as an act of feminine submission as it has been before, but also could be considered as another more realized act done deliberately by the main character to get what she wants and better her situation. The smile that comes to her face immediately after this act, in fact, confirms this interpretation. It's as if Sandra were aware of her talent for performing oral sex.

After some consideration, it seems that despite the characters of both films cannot escape the violence placed on their bodies, they are strong people that are astute and intelligent, and in this sense it is possible that the directors of both films did not create characters so deprived of agency like they seemed to have upon seeing the films at first glance and in the fatality of the violence and the unhappy ending of the characters.

8. Conclusions

In light of these considerations, we believe that although the tragic end of the characters of Laura (*Miss Bala*) and Sandra (*El otro sueño americano*) is part of process of cinematographic denouncement of the feminine body subject to patriarchal narcoviolence. In other words, it is subject to the violence tinged with misogyny and contempt towards the feminine gender that is exercised by narcotrafficking

groups. You can criticize the fatality with which *Miss Bala* recreates and perpetuates the gender archetype representations. This situation is also perceived in the short film *El otro sueño americano*, presented in this article as support. By staging the feminine impotence to end its submission to necropower exercised by the traffickers, the two films contribute in certain degree to the cinematographic naturalization of the patriarchal discourse on the woman, as denounced by Creed (1987). With this affirmation, we are not proposing to minimize the importance of gender violence in Mexico, nor much less deny its existence. The idea is for a redeeming of feminine representations in the cinematographic space that are situated outside the archetype of the dominated and weak female victim to narcotrafficking strong, dominant, executioner-style men (Mercader, 2012: 236).

Films like *Miss Bala* are right to bring to the screen the difficult reality that women suffer in the context of narcoviolence. This denouncement plays a fundamental role in bringing awareness to the gravity and magnitude of this problem and its repercussions on women. However, it seems that the impossibility to beat the image of a woman without resources or hope in the face of necropolitics of the narco-world reinforces and affirms the dead-end fate of women in the patriarchal violent world of the U.S. border.

Nevertheless, we consider, just as De Lauretis (1987) says, that we have to redeem the feminine agency present in the dominant discourse instead of simply presenting these discourses as oppressive. For this reason, we also agree that both *Miss Bala* and *El otro sueño americano* speak of a feminine configuration of fiction that makes its own decisions and actively participates, despite the systematic failure of their initiatives. However, it must be questioned if this type of agency is sufficient to achieve the construction of a feminine emancipation in the Mexican imaginary or if its convenient to point towards a model of a woman even more empowering. Also yet to study, in terms of future research, is to what degree the treatment of

the issue of gender narcoviolence by female directors like Lourdes Portillo, who produced the documentary *Señorita extraviada* (2001), differs from this masculine approach, making possible the presentation of a voice and a point of view that breaks with cinema made by and for men.

Notes

1. This article is a revised and extended version of a paper published in the journal *Hispanophone*, student journal from the Hispanic Studies program (Montreal University).

2. However, it is necessary to note that the fact that Sandra is presented as an object of gaze does not necessarily mean that the director agrees with the misogynist view that is omnipresent in his short film. On the contrary, the final credits are very clear about the intent to denounce that which prevails in the work of Arroyo, with a use of the past perfect that also links the crimes and disappearances with the present (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 571-572). Said denouncing effect of the short film can also be interpreted in the brief presence of crosses painted pink that appear in the window (2:52) and that invite you to understand the horrible fate of Sandra as part of a bigger phenomenon known as femicide (Castro-Ricalde, 2015: 570, 572).

3. It is true that the title of the film, *Miss Bala*, presents the feminine character as absolute protagonist of the movie. Yet said title does not recognize an identity or an existence outside the beauty pageant and exposure to violence. In this sense, the title seems to give anonymity to the character. Laura is not Laura, but rather a beauty queen.

4. However, it is necessary to note that not only the bodies of women are instrumentalized by necropower and relegated to the bare life: bodies of some men are, too. The male cadavers, whether they be of enemy traffickers or U.S. drug enforcement agents, are frequently hung from bridges and viaducts and used as means of communication by the narcotrafficking groups that use these bodies to send messages to rival cartels, to police or to the

public at large. In Naranjo's film, for example, the cadaver of an undercover DEA agent, after having been crushed by a truck and drug down the road by the neck, is hung from a viaduct to demonstrate in public the strength and power of the group La Estrella. The group uses the cadaver to send a warning to the civil forces that try to deter their activities (1:27:14).

after having left the dead bodies in front of the U.S. embassy: Lino is sitting in the middle seat and has an arm around her neck (27:31). Another example is when Lino's face gradually gets closer to Laura's in the bed and appears in the right side of the shot (43:12).

5. Think for example about the moment in which Laura and Lino are seated in the backseat of a truck

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About the Author:

Gabrielle Pannetier Leboeuf has a doctorate in Hispanic Studies jointly from Montreal University and Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV). She is also an assistant professor for the Latin American Studies program at the Department of World Literature and Languages (Montreal University). She was awarded with a Joseph-Armand-Bombardier Canada (BESC-CRSH) Graduate Scholarship.

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