Tracing violence and cruelty in Mexico's visual culture. Images of violence and their effects on subjectivity and the social bond

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Abstract

From the beginning of the war against drug trafficking in 2006, the visualisation of violence has become an everyday staple in the Mexican imaginary. Images of violence are present throughout different communication media and in varying degrees of gruesomeness. These images slipped into historically constructed discursive structures that signified and discriminated the other whilst building their own modes of signification and operation, thus creating a visuality sustained in and through violence at the service of a necropower. This visuality was formed from a complex array of words and images weaved into an entangled, self-signifying network where everything constituting the image is constrained to the signifiers that enable them.

To understand the discourses and traces of today's images of violence in Mexico, this thesis begins with an incursion into some images produced during the Dirty War in the 1960s. This research aims to elaborate on the modes of visualising violence that have been studied across diverse geographies and focuses, in particular, on the effects of visual modalities of violence on subjectivity and the social bond. The theoretical sources used to develop this project—psychoanalytic theory, post-structural philosophy, and visual studies—allow a diverse yet critical and comprehensive view of the subject, the social bond, and their relationship to the images and visuality of violence. Thus, rather than remaining in condemnation of images of violence, this project examines in detail the traces of visual violence in discourses that have enabled the proliferation of violence and, more troubling still, cruelty against historically marginalised and criminalised subjectivities. Following this, the thesis proposes memory and mourning as paths to confront and move the paradigms of representation of violence to create new imaginary and symbolic experiences regarding the lives and deaths of other(s).

Content

Introduction

On 26 September 2014, six people were killed, and 43 students from the Escuela Normal Rural of Ayotzinapa forcibly disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The cruelty and magnitude of this event had severe national and international ramifications. It turned the international gaze onto Mexico's human rights violations. It epitomised—up to that point in time—the failed war against drug trafficking undertaken by the country's previous president, Felipe Calderón. It further unravelled the conversation regarding the involvement of state forces and organised crime in forced disappearances in Mexico and the impunity with which they operate.

Even though the country's dead and disappeared people had already reached alarming numbers—that have only continued to increase since—they were somewhat veiled behind discourses that had achieved creating a sense of exceptionality, criminality, and remoteness. That is, discourses presenting the problem as some "bad ones" out there in the countryside—paralleling farmers and peasants in rural Mexico to poppy farmers—threatening the country's stability. The dead were framed and justified under these discourses as "being up to something" or "collateral damage". Consequently, the dead and disappeared were presented as merely [inaccurate][1] figures. These figures were then inscribed in tautological discourses claiming the need for the war against drug trafficking.[2]

The events of 26 September constitute an indentation, in the Derridean sense developed in chapter two, a breaking point in Mexican history and memory signalling a before and after that night in Iguala. The murders, torture, and disappearances of this night, the subsequent concealment of the truth, and the rampant impunity impeding any justice exposed, at the same time, anticipated its continuity, the deep crevices of violence and

[1] It has often been argued that the statistics have consistently underrepresented the reality of the war on drugs. Furthermore, Felipe Calderón's government stopped informing the number of dead people incurred by the war. "The figure corresponding to 2011 has been catalogued as reserved and confidential". Daniel Lizárraga, "Oculta el gobierno cifra de Muertos en la guerra contra el narco" (FROM, 15 September, 2023: https://www.animalpolitico.com/2012/01/oculta-el-gobierno-cifra-de-muertos-en-la-guerra-contra-el-narco).

[2] "The supposed national security crisis that Calderón said justified the War on Drugs is based mainly on a discursive strategy without material foundation. The sociologist Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo already showed, with a simple analysis based on official figures, that the country's violence began after the militarization ordered by Calderón in 2008". Oswaldo Zavala, *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist. Narcotrafficking in US and Mexican Culture*, Nashville, Tennessee, Vanderbilt University Press, 2022, p. 8.

cruelty in the country—the necropolitics that had configured the country for decades, if not centuries.

At the time of writing this introduction, the Ayotzinapa case, as it is commonly named, is still ongoing. However, the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI in Spanish) concluded their eight-year presence in Mexico due to the continued State's resistance to providing the necessary information that could help determine what happened to the 43 students. For justice to be achieved, members of the GIEI, Ángela Buitrago and Carlos Beristain, contend the truth is needed first and foremost. A collective reflection regarding the lies and concealment of that truth, they say, is crucial to understanding its impact on Mexico's future "so that Mexico has another future than the one threatening with violence and fear".[3] The importance of the search for truth and justice cannot be overstated because, as Buitrago's and Beristain's words elucidate, nine years later, Mexico lives with the looming presence and reality of fear and violence: forced disappearances, executions, massacres, and feminicides that continue to increase whilst being simultaneously downplayed, ignored, or disdained.

This project stems partly from the events of the night of 26 September 2014. I had previously researched the last century's forced disappearances and memory processes in Mexico and Latin America and was conscious of the wave of disappearances that had ensued since 2006. In 2014, I was studying for a master's degree in subjectivity and violence, and in prior years, I attended protests condemning the violence in the country. This is to say, I had studied and analysed the historical, political, economic, cultural, subjective, and social expressions and ramifications of violence and cruelty and had been involved in social and community projects that addressed different types of violence against historically marginalised groups in Mexico.

However, following the profound affectation of the cruelty of disappearing 43 young students and killing six others came another realisation: that of the modes of giving and portraying death. Julio César Mondragón Fontes, a classmate of the 43 students, was tortured to death, his face skinned[4], and the image of his body and face shared on different

[3] Ángela Buitrago and Carlos Beristain, "Duele investigar desapariciones entre mentiras y ocultamiento; se vuelve carrera de obstáculos: Palabras de despedida del GIEI" (FROM, 25 July, 2023: https://adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2023/07/25/duele-investigar-desapariciones-entre-mentiras-y-ocultamiento-se-vuelve-carrera-de-obstaculos-palabras-de-despedida-del-giei/).

[4] In the beginning, it was assumed that the skinning of his face was done by the same people who tortured him. A newer autopsy revealed that Julio César "suffered 64 fractures in 40 bones, mostly in his skull, face and spine […] But Larrieta added that Mondragon's face was not skinned by his captors as some people had alleged, saying animals were responsible. The student died prior to that of brain injuries, he said". Associated Press in Mexico, "Classmate of 43 missing Mexican students was

media outlets[5]. His image, against his or the spectator's will, was shown in social media, the *nota roja,* and news reports. I saw the image several times in the days following the event. All of them, as it happens in our time, without warning.

Throughout the years, the image of Julio César Mondragón's dead body has elicited diverse discussions from academics, reporters, artists, and the general population. In addition to having his tortured body shown to all, (t)his image became an object of discussion on the seemingly relentless question of whether to show violence or not—made almost into an emblem on either side's arguments. Aware of the contradictions this entails—and carrying those concerns throughout the research—one of the initial conceptions for this project stems from the reproduction of this particular image of Julio César Mondragón and the debates surrounding it.

Even if each time was as horrifying as the first, the first time seeing this image was disarming. Parallel to the, in a way, *imagined* cruelness, pain, and horror of the brutal absence of 43 students, an extremely *real* visibility of death ran with it. Up to that moment, almost a decade since the beginning of the war had elapsed, and images of violence had already proliferated in the Mexican visual culture; they were a recurring, unavoidable sight. However, this image was, for me, of another order. What I have come to realise is that it managed to *establish* another order. It broke through the repetitiveness of countless other images and, retrospectively and prospectively, singularised them. Faced with this image, I asked what I was seeing and why I *could* see it.

I avoid debates on showing or not showing violence and their accompanying moral and political views. Consequently, I do not address image production from that perspective, as trying to understand something that exists and will likely continue existing encloses its own futility. Instead, my main interest in violence led me to think instead of the subjective and social perspectives of violence and cruelty and how these have converged into a visuality of violence. Thus, I considered how we interacted with images of violence and how it has led to a practice of seeing without seeing, of placing images of violence in the immediacy of the instant of looking and setting them up for abrupt oblivion, that is, erasing, repressing, or pushing them from conscious thought into the vastness of forgetting.

Therefore, and to counter oblivion, I question whether and how these images could affect subjectivity and the social bond. This implies considering them not just as mere

tortured, report says" (FROM, 23 July, 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/11/julio-cesar-mondragon-missing-mexican-students-tortured).

[5] This image appears even in more recent articles, for instance, one by Infobae on 26 September, 2019.

representations of violence but as active components of violences with psychic and discursive operations of their own. Considering that images can affect the way we perceive, engage, and *talk* about violence implies that they are more than the visual counterpart to violence: they can enact their own violence, that is, the violence of the image. If exploring the effects of violence on subjective and social formations is imperative in contemporary Mexico, then analysing images of violence as constitutive of today's violences is indispensable.

This research project approaches a distinctive side to violence in the country, one circulating through the subjects' and groups' imaginaries. On the one hand, it is a type of violence that hypervisibilises violence and cruelty by presenting images simultaneously as a factual representation of an event, a metonymy of the widespread violence in the State, and an object of *jouissance*. On the other hand, however, it invisibilises—or surreptitiously disseminates—the power enacted through a discursive visuality through a magnified presentation of the horror and cruelty.

Whilst I provide a brief context for the situation in Mexico in the first two chapters—and I recognise that there is a broad variety of actors, contexts, and events all forming part of the violence in the country—I concentrate my questions on the modes of killing, and visually and discursively framing death, as part of a grammatic of horror and fear. Most of the images I examine here capture the violence and reproduce it along with biases, discourses, and signifiers that, far from allowing the possibility of thinking or doing with the unbearable of the *real* of violence and cruelty, reiterate the frames from which we see and live. The effects these images can cause—anguish, fear, melancholy, morbid curiosity, *jouissance*—feed and are fed into the symbolic chains that can, in turn, constitute subjectivity and the social bond.

Thus, I focus on images of violence as part of a violent visual culture that constitutes and is constituted by what we see and how we see it. These images form a regular fixture in our increasingly digital and visual realities. In a country with over 100,000 disappeared and over 350,000 murdered people[6], so heavily centred on the visuality of every type of torture and inflicted pain imaginable, we are all, in a way—although with significant differences in forms of proximity and engagement—touched by violence. Pausing to think of

[6] José Luis Pardo Veiras and Íñigo Arredondo, "Una guerra inventada y 350,000 muertos en México" (FROM, 20 June, 2021: https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2021/06/14/mexico-guerra-narcotrafico-calderon-homicidios-desaparecidos/).

how we relate to these images, the violences that these images disseminate, is imperative insomuch as it implies pausing to consider our interactions with violence itself.

In that sense, this research aims at moving the discussion from predominant discourses on violence, especially from social sciences, towards a humanities perspective that allows exploring the subjective and social implications of violence and visuality. Whilst providing a broad context and simple overview of the actors involved, addressing the modes of framing violence and cruelty allows me to study the iterations of violence in the country by casting a glance further back in time to understand the repetitions of acts and events of violence in Mexico's memory.

On the one hand, I emphasise the work of memory to understand and recognise the visual traces of violence and, on the other hand, to propose a way of engaging with past violences and creating departures in today's ones with a perspective of a different future to come. From the production of imagery of the Dirty War to the one framed by the war against drug trafficking, I follow Sigmund Freud's conception of memory and traces as expressed in his letter to Wilhelm Fliess, stating that "memory is present not once but several times over".[7]

The singular marks inscribed by each event are reorganised with the advent of new traces. Memory, thus, cannot be fixated as one thing, particularly as one that has been, as it is in constant rearrangement with the articulation of new traces. A trace as memory, as established by Jacques Derrida, "is not a pure fraying that might be retrieved at any time as a simple presence, it is the impalpable and invisible difference between frayings".[8] In this research, I approach traces by singularising the visible marks of violence in the images, the images as traces, and the signifiers articulated through them constituting discourses employed by those in power.

In numerous contexts of political violence where there have been efforts to address past events, one of the most crucial components has been to fight for truth and justice. Since these two are, as Derrida would contend, possible-impossible aporias, memory is needed to sustain these fights and keep the wound open so that the event is not closed, repressed, forgotten, and, eventually, repeated. Exploring the Dirty War and the war against drug trafficking in Mexico responds to this call for memory, truth, and justice. Even when

[7] Sigmund Freud, "Periodicity and Self-Analysis", in Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904,* Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 207.
[8] Jacques Derrida and Jeffrey Mehlman, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", in *Yale French Studies,* no. 48, p. 78.

understanding the differences and complexities corresponding to each period, some continuities can respond to the concealment of information and politics of oblivion.

Remembrance entails the act of naming, as will be developed in chapter one, as naming is essential to subjectivise life, to see more than cadavers or numbers in the images. This invokes other ways of being with the other, those who survive and those who are no longer here. Whilst the current Mexican context entails the difficulty of being an ongoing conflict, memory serves not solely as a look to the past but as an opportunity to make *as if* we are beyond it and start moving towards a future containing a critical view of the present. It is the opportunity to re-situate or re-position the gaze before the dead and enunciate their names. Memory can be a starting point to forge other social bonds to knit together and to regard and face the other, to resist and defy power with its discourses of death, horror and terror, and to engage with the potency and agency of the image to create other imaginaries.

> Without a doubt, "every trace of the past is interrogated from today, and every historical reconstruction is carried on from present successive times" (Archila, 1998, 289). It is the possibility to open the perspective towards the future, that is, of re-configuring time. If memory did not have the potentiality to recompose the future, it would not make sense, and all its political potency would disappear. Subjects and societies recompose their "recollections" in the understanding of being able to do something with them in the future.[9]

Memory attempts to preserve the traces; however, it does so not only as the traces of what has been but as "traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come—come from the future, from the *to come*".[10] Traces are not in the past; they are also *to come*. This is how memory in Mexico could, even if in an ongoing conflict, introduce ruptures in the present, bearing in mind what has been and looking towards the future. Indeed, it is a memory of what can come.

I approach the question of the effects of images of violence on subjectivity and social bonds through a multidisciplinary perspective, mainly psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, and visual studies; these come together in each chapter. Despite this being a project on images, language is at the core of my questions on violence and visuality insomuch as it is the fundamental basis for understanding violence, subjectivity, and the social bond as well as being central for the methodology I have developed for approaching

[9] Elsa Blair Trujillo, "Memorias de violencias. Espacio, tiempo y narración", in *Controversias,* no. 185, p. 10.
[10] Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2nd ed., 1989, p. 58.

the images included in this project. Furthermore, images are active modes of signification of reality, as I argue in chapter two, and language is fundamental to addressing their subjective and discursive effects.

In this project, I have tried to work through varied contradictions in addressing the problem, including some images and forgoing others, and how I analyse them. One contradiction includes, for instance, the uneasiness with which I viewed the insistent reproduction of Julio César Mondragón's image, its discussions, and how this was the norm for the images that were granted more attention. Although I do not include Julio César Mondragón's image, I recognise the contradiction of it being, for me, a founding moment—that no image of an involuntarily portrayed person, as Marina Azahua calls them, should be, yet can no longer *not* be—, and not addressing it more in the project.

This has been a consistent difficulty throughout the dissertation: why address some images instead of others, how best to approach them considering my subjectivity in a formal research space, if and how to warn others of what they will see—reiterating this warning now—, and what voice to inhabit. This last one has been particularly troublesome, as it implies sustaining and working through the contradictions whilst trying my utmost to be ethical and respectful of the lives portrayed in these images. It has likewise implied hearing others' concerns with my project, understanding different views from other subjectivities, and balancing them with my own [undeniable] subjective views and voice in this project.

Another main concern is how to analyse and present my arguments for the images of violence without reproducing them or their violence, as many media outlets do. Often, in many social media posts or digital versions of newspapers or magazines, images are shown without meriting a minimum textual basis or interpretation—I strived to do the opposite without going to the extreme of oversignifying. Throughout the research that began years before my PhD programme, I have deliberated if showing the images implies inescapably reproducing them or if there are alternative ways of engaging with them without constraining them into visual pieces sustaining power's discourses.

Thus, I have constantly paused to consider the theoretical, abstract approximations of violence, cruelty, and visuality and to question my subjective views and the ethical implications of researching and writing about these images. Ileana Diéguez asks what the correct use of images would be if remaining silent and silencing brutality would also—as would happen in not showing images of violence in the name of aesthetic acceptability—grant victory to the perpetrators.[11] Therefore, I decided to include the images because they

[11] Ileana Diéguez, *Cuerpos sin duelo*, Mexico, Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2016, p. 29.

exist, they are real, eyes have seen them, they have made imprints of perception in countless Mexicans, and, more importantly, because suppressing them is not a realistic alternative to showing them without consideration or explanation, as many communication media do.[12]

In the counted instances when these images are accompanied by an account of the event or a reference to the image itself, they talk *about* it, reinforcing signifiers and discourses. Thus, I consider that what is more important than merely talking about an image is addressing it, knowing that those depicted on them are subjects and considering it singularly. This last point is essential because, due to the insistent production of images of violence, they become an amorphous mass, condensing the violence into a form of image. However difficult, one starting point is giving images the time to think with them and not stop at the reflex action of what is usually said or thought about them.

One of the main problems I have encountered is that there is no consistency or structure for where the images are shown, how they are addressed, and the content deemed admissible for any given media outlet. Gruesome images are displayed on television just as in newspapers or magazines for sale at newspaper stands. Many images of violence are shown in the *nota roja*—which I address in chapter two—and many are included in online newspapers or publications. However, what stands out is that a simple Google search for the neologisms that these images receive—*desollados* (skinned), *decapitados* (decapitated), *mutilados* (mutilated), *desmembrados* (dismembered), *quemados* (burned), *colgados* (hanged), *embolsados* (bagged), and *encobijados* (wrapped in blankets)—throws thousands and thousands of [unfiltered and uncensored] results.

My research is not focused on the adequateness of showing these images or censoring them in print or online. I have found that thousands of images depicting people whose bodies have suffered various degrees and forms of cruelty are constrained to a single word—the neologism used for the type of death administered—and thumbnails that not even their small size could conceal what one is about to see. Therefore, any approach I had to take would require considering these impressions and going deeper into their signification whilst placing them into a broad visual culture.

The methodology I devised to work with these images implies tracing, digging, excavating in the unconscious of the image, in the cemetery of images, and putting those representations into words. It is a method of seeing, reading and considering the images

[12] Images will not be included in the full version of the thesis publicly available for lack of copyright permission.

without immediate interpretation and signification. It implies holding the gaze and placing oneself before the image, opening ourselves to what they are trying to tell us. It is asking what the image wants of us and questioning the cultural and political place and display of these images and our acts of seeing and coexisting with them. Fundamentally, this methodology implies addressing the spectres to create another symbolic experience, a poiesis of the violence and the cruelty.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. It comprises two periods, from the Dirty War in the 1960s to the war against drug trafficking that started in 2006; the focus is mainly on the latter. The first chapter develops the Dirty War in Mexico to understand the violences left unresolved and unacknowledged, the forgotten forced disappearances, the discourses made on the students and teachers framing them as vandals, thieves, rioters, damaging Mexican values when they were fighting for a better life for all, sustaining racist discourses on indigenous leaders that, historically in Mexico, have been marginalised, repressed, and neglected.

For this chapter, I conducted archival research in the *Hemeroteca Nacional de México,* in national newspapers and publications covering the period of the Dirty War from the attack on the Madera Barracks in 1965 to the murder of Lucio Cabañas in 1974. Whilst there are some images from these two events, the one with the most abundant visual production is the massacre of 2 October 1968 in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. I examine these images and their traces as discourse to find the lines of continuity with today's violences. Since nearly thirty years passed between Cabañas' death and the beginning of the war against drug trafficking, I include an interlude to briefly address the subsequent events and end of the Dirty War and some of the most significant instances of violence in the country and the failure in seeking the memory, truth, and justice of the Dirty War.

Chapter two sets the theoretical foundations for the research. It develops the concept of violence as a foundational guiding axis, how it is employed throughout the dissertation, and its fundamental differentiation from aggressivity and cruelty. Following the arguments presented in chapter one, this chapter further addresses the importance of regarding the images that we see today not solely as original and unexpected occurrences but as something that has roots further back. Even though this project is not centred on the *nota roja,* I briefly address this type of publication as a media that has historically depicted images of violence. I include it to understand its preponderance both in circulating images of violence during the Dirty War and as a genre that facilitated or conditioned the way images of violence

today are presented in other media such as newspapers, television, and social media and how we see them.

Following these approximations of what constitutes violence and its incorporation into the *nota roja*, I examine how violence in Mexico today is placed under the signifier *narco*. I am particularly interested in the discursive production that transited from categorising the "evil" of the country from the *guerrilleros* of the last century to the *narco* of this one. To understand the visual production of violence, we must examine the words we use to signify the violence in the country, particularly challenging every aspect of as reducible to *narco*. In this chapter, I examine images whose publications employ the prefix *narco* to connote anything from bodies to situations to events.

The third chapter develops the theoretical framework to address whether images of violence can affect subjectivity and the social bond. I expand on the concept of the subject and its differences with subjectivity. I address psychic operations based on the three Lacanian registers to delve into the constitution of subjectivity and how it could potentially be affected by images of violence. Then, I examine how the concept of abjection is used to describe and explain violence and images in Mexico. The final theoretical aspect I address in this chapter is the social bond and its basis in discourse.

I approach the severe problem of violence in Mexico as dwelling in the extremes of showing and hiding—even when hiding by showing. Alongside the theoretical discussion, I include images of two extremes seen in images of violence: *embolsados* (bagged) and *encobijados* (wrapped in blankets) on the one hand and *decapitados* (decapitated) on the other. The first two practices imply placing dead—sometimes dismembered—bodies in bags or blankets to hide the body whilst ensuring everyone knows there is a body. Decapitations, whilst being visually staggering and leaving no doubt that that is a head, are often placed in incongruous—at times ludicrous or grotesque—situations that, additionally to intensifying the certainty that that is a human head, and "instil fear and thus assume control and power"[13], reinforce the cruelty and desubjectivation conducted upon certain bodies.

Following the third chapter's argument of the extremes of violence and cruelty as a strategy for singular and social (dis)articulations, chapter four develops the premise that images of violence are inscribed in a wider icononecropolitics. I incorporate arguments

[13] Brigitte Adriaensen, "Cabezas cortadas en la narconovela mexicana. El espectáculo de lo abyecto", in Amar Sánchez, Ana María, Avilés, Luis, coords., *Representaciones de la violencia en América Latinagenealogías culturales, formas literarias y dinámicas del presente*, Madrid, Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2015, p. 127.

presented in the previous chapters, particularly the discourses surrounding the war on drugs, to question what the social configurations these aims at affecting. Furthermore, this entails developing the visual discourses that enable the proliferation of this violence—the violence of the image. I continue exploring the media and the medium's effect on subjectivity in relation to visuality and the social bond.

In this chapter, visuality is conceived as being sustained in violence in service of a necropower, of which capitalism is inherently elemental, generating the necessary sociocultural conditions for cruelty to operate. It forms a landscape of horror, terror, and dispensability, creating the imaginary conditions for the death and disappearance of the abject or "guilty" other. Thus, inseparable from capitalist and neoliberal structures, there is a categorical differentiation between what is essential (capital, natural resources, and physical space) and what is not (life). The images that frame this chapter are those that evidence the staging of corporal remains or what Diéguez calls a *necrotheatre*. These images have become a staple in the violent visual culture in Mexico: the excess of bodies—piled up or hanging from bridges. With this, I also want to explore how practices are replicated and cruelly enhanced.

The interrogation of the effects of images of violence on subjectivity and the social bond remained, and still does, as a question. If these effects can eventually be witnessed or analysed as part of a violent visuality, these will be devised in the years to come by looking towards the past. Nevertheless, following the theoretical framework and the analyses of images in the previous chapters, some potential symptoms and effects can be perceived in subjectivity and the social bond or can potentially be used to examine them.

The fifth chapter traces back to the beginning of the text to not only attempt a culmination of the project from the Dirty War and the war against the *narco* but as an attempt to cast the work of memory backwards and forwards. That is, trying to understand not only the shortcomings in the work of memory but also how memory can be used to forge other futures, subjectivities, and bonds. The importance of including the Dirty War comes from the fact that those memories reside only in some, and Mexico's past events, ruptures, and losses have not been adequately narrated nor assimilated into a fight for truth and justice, as witnessed with recent events that I address in the conclusion.

I analyse the dichotomic concepts of victim and victimiser to understand how these positions can be incorporated into subjectivities and bonds in the country. I further explore the concept of trauma because of its significance for Mexico, even though it is considerably complex and cannot be used for everyone and everything. However, when examined

alongside the concept of victim and the work of memory, it can help address subjectivities in the country. Likewise, whilst this project does not focus on forced disappearances, I include these to situate further the former concepts.

Finally, I incorporate some artworks that help reposition the gaze on violence and cruelty and incite the work of memory and mourning. Artworks such as these can help us create other ways to live with images of violence by challenging our signifiers and driving us to share the experiences of violence and cruelty in common. Against images that reiterate discourses that impede thinking and positioning, art can build other social bonds and unearth the traces that are unconsciously yet consistently articulated into repression and oblivion. Although these examples come at the very end, and only briefly, they are included as ways to hope for other futures for Mexico.

Chapter one: a not-so-distant past

I am stuck in a story of
cursed mirrors.
—Operation Condor
political prisoner[14]

However the image
enters
its force remains within
my eyes
[…]
Within my eyes
the flickering afterimages
of a nightmare rain.
—Audre Lorde[15]

In what manner are the ways we see and look today rooted in the past? This question serves as the guiding axis of the chapter—and for those that follow—to examine the possibility of understanding the subjective and social interactions with images at a given moment in history. Likewise, it serves to ponder if, and if so, how images can be, as language is, iterations of other images. In this chapter, I will explore the condition of continuity not only in Mexico's modes and discourses of war but also in the symbolic and imaginary gestures that accompany and frame them.

This project follows a Derridean concept of memory and, consequently, mourning. It is non-linear, possible-impossible, not oriented towards the past but towards what is to come.[16] To think of the possible event of remembrance implies an opposition: the possibility,

[14] This phrase, "estoy metido en una historia de espejos malditos" in Spanish, was written by a political prisoner in the 1970s in a crumpled piece of paper, and found by someone who kept it in their memory, according to Stella Calloni. There was no signature on it. Stella Calloni, "Operación Cóndor pacto criminal", Mexico City, La Jornada, Ediciones, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 19.

[15] Afterimages, by Audre Lorde.

[16] "What is an impossible mourning? What does it tell us, this impossible mourning, about an essence of memory? And as concerns the other in us, even in this 'distant premonition of the other', where is the most unjust betrayal? Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in

or, rather, the reality of forgetting. Thus, for remembrance to be on the horizon, the lapsus, repressions, or omissions that take place in forgetting are equally significant.

From the studies conducted by several authors, we can observe at least three lines of continuance between the contemporary war against drugs and the Dirty War of the previous century. First, they have been classified as a continuing 'low-intensity war', encompassing the different periods from then until now. They have been compared through their common ultimate objectives and interests. Finally, there are similarities in the repetitions and exacerbations of the forms of conducting and representing them.[17] Beyond these crucial historical and political characteristics, the interest lies in exploring whether the contemporary visuality of violence in Mexico has iterations or traces from the past. Consequently, this chapter will question the modes of representation of violence from the perspective of an out-of-joint memory containing past, present, and future.

The Mexican Dirty War is notoriously complex and convoluted because it mainly unfolded, as Roberto Manero Brito states, in silence[18]—both textual and visual. However, the available glimpses into its narratives and discourses can shed particular light on the present-day elements of the equally muddled war against drug trafficking. From the diverse range of insurgent movements and counter-insurgent operations to the lack of records, documents and evidence, academics, civil society organisations, and the general population are still unearthing the extent of the human rights violations committed during the Dirty War.[19]

This chapter will explore some of the few images—in comparison to the present—produced during this period to understand their subsequent use and articulation in our social memory and present consciousness. Whilst these images are not analogous to contemporary ones, neither in quantity nor in the visualisation of the horrors that can be inflicted on others' bodies, they signify, on the one hand, the consequences of a lack of remembrance and accountability concerning the repression, torture, murder, and disappearance of thousands of people. On the other hand, they evidence the traces and connections between the past and present in terms of visualising violence. The argument is not that images of violence in Mexico have followed a straight, chronological, linear narrative

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the tomb or the vault of some narcissism?". Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires: for Paul de Man. Revised edition,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 6.

[17] These will be addressed in this and the next chapter.

[18] Roberto Manero Brito, *Más allá del horror. Ensayos sobre la construcción social de las víctimas de la violencia*, Mexico, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2021, p. 16.

[19] The lack of documentation, information, and access to records is a recurring problem in Mexico; this lack is as telling as the excesses.

that resulted in the accumulation of practices that shape those of today. Instead, it is that, in the present-day visual culture, we can find traces of past events of violence that still have the potency to shape visuality—and, consequently and importantly, the social bond. As Juan Felipe Urueña Calderón argues:

> From the perspective of the montage, the point is not to convey history establishing causal links between events of the past and events of the present, nor is it to compartmentalise historical periods as passed tests that at the same time have enabled the emergence of a new time.[20]

To look at the violences of the here-now in the following chapters—which simultaneously do not ignore nor establish causal links between past and present—this chapter will provide the context of Mexico's so-called Dirty War through the images and discourses this war produced. From the 2 October 1968 massacre to the murder of indigenous revolutionary leaders Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas, this chapter argues that there are visual components to the discourses that segment life and death into those worth mourning and those that are not. The return or continuance of violences is particularly notable in discourses that framed the [un]grievable bodies in the country during the Dirty War.

This chapter also maintains that images and memory are intrinsically linked by writing. Therefore, exploring the relationship of language with visuality, text, and image will be a recurring theme. This will anticipate the link between language and violence as well as the link between language and violence with subjectivity, which will be expanded further in the following chapters. Introducing these elements whilst analysing images of the Dirty War and the discourses justifying different repressions and aggressions against certain groups or individuals begins exemplifying how violence and cruelty in the Mexican context are not spontaneous nor isolated.

Whilst some consider the beginnings of the Mexican Dirty War from the 1940s to the early 1980s[21], I will address distinct events from the 1960s and 1970s, given that images of

[20] Juan Felipe Urueña Calderón, "Variaciones visuales en torno a la *corbata colombiana.* Análisis de un ícono de la violencia en Colombia", in Uribe María Victoria and Parrini, Rodrigo, eds., *La violencia y su sombra*. *Aproximaciones desde Colombia y México,* Bogota, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Cuajimalpa, 2020, p. 52.

[21] The extension of this period is mainly comprised of the perspective of the general uprising—and subsequent disarticulation—of armed movements in the twentieth century. Laura Castellanos, whose work figures prominently in this chapter, developed one of the exceptional comprehensive documentations of the armed movements of the last century. Her book begins with the defence of the land by agrarian leader Rubén Jaramillo in the state of Morelos, central Mexico, from the 1940s to his assassination by the Mexican military in 1962 to the disarticulation of the remaining armed movements in the early 80s—and the eventual creation of the EZLN in Chiapas.

the events—massacres, assassinations, and tortures—have existed since then. First, a brief context of the Dirty War in the context of Operation Condor will be provided. It will be followed by an analysis of specific events in this period through images available of the time. These images represent the ways in which secrets are constructed visually to achieve certain political and economic ends and ultimately are accepted by society.

A brief context of Operation Condor

The Dirty Wars in South America occurred in the frame of Operation Condor, or Plan Condor, in which the United States (U.S.) orchestrated the imposition of dictatorships through military coups to combat the 'communist threat' in the hemisphere. The 'communist threat' were the organisations, groups, and individuals claiming and fighting for structural changes in the social and political fields. To counter these struggles, the military and local elite alliance implemented repressive and illegal actions to preserve their power and privileges.[22]

At the same time, they counted on U.S. support, which, based on the national security doctrine outlined by the Cold War, aimed at maintaining its capitalist influence through sympathetic regimes in the hemisphere.[23] The doctrine, Norberto Barreto explains, "considered progressive movements and nationalist leaders of developing countries as communists that had to be fought".[24] A crucial element of Operation Condor was that the different security agencies of these countries created a shared database of the "threats". The network created between intelligence services, Castellanos explains, allowed countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia to conduct "transborder operations to abduct, torture, rape, incarcerate, avenge, and disappear tens of thousands of men and women who opposed the military regimes regardless of the country they lived in".[25]

> U.S. forces worked behind the scenes with the Latin American military and intelligence forces that comprised the Condor Group, providing resources,

[22] Norberto Barreto Velázquez, "La Operación Cóndor: un enfoque comparativo", in *Histórica,* XXXVII.2, p. 173.
[23] *Loc. Cit.*
[24] *Loc. Cit.*
[25] Laura Castellanos, *México armado* 1943-1981, Mexico D.F., Ediciones Era S. A. de C. V., 2007, p. 167.

> administrative assistance, intelligence, and financing. U.S. officers performed an enabling role among the Latin American military and intelligence forces that organized Operation Condor. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, CIA and military officers worked to meld the intelligence forces of the region together into one organization and urged their counterparts to undertake cross-border surveillance and pursuit of political opponents. The CIA arranged meetings of South American police and military officers—including some who ran death squads—to establish contacts and facilitate the transfer and sharing of repressive techniques, including torture methods, among the region's intelligence forces. These alliances and connections were the foundation for Operation Condor, and U.S. security forces essentially acted as host and patron, while remaining in the background.[26]

Joan Patrice McSherry estimates that the Condor prototype was formalised within the InterAmerican system after the 1973 Uruguayan coup. Chile suffered the same fate shortly after due to Augusto Pinochet's coup against Salvador Allende's government. McSherry argues that thousands of people flew from the military governments installed in these and other countries towards Argentina, still governed by President Juan Domingo Perón. The Operation Condor facilitated the 'hunter-killer' squads to silence political opponents who escaped their home countries.[27] Eventually, a military regime was likewise installed in Argentina, becoming one of the countries with the most significant number of forced disappearances.

Stella Calloni estimates over 50,000 forced disappearances in the Southern Cone and over 200,000 deaths in Central America during the 36 years of successive dictatorships.[28] Whilst not all of these are comprised within the period or operational scope of the fully formed Plan Condor[29], the U.S. involvement before and after in these regions evidences the seeds of the Condor Plan. For instance, Calloni argues that Guatemala—where the first mass forced disappearances of the continent took place in the 1960s—was the CIA's playground for right-winged terrorism.[30]

Even though the Mexican Dirty War was contemporaneous with others in the region, there are significant differences that led to questioning the appropriateness of categorising

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[26] J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America*, United Kingdom, Rowman and Littlefield Publications, 2005, p. 250.
[27] J. Patrice McSherry, "La maquinaria de la muerte: la Operación Cóndor", in *Taller (Segunda Época). Revista de Sociedad, Cultura y Política en América Latina*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 33-34.
[28] There is likewise evidence of the involvement of the U.S. in support of illegal operation groups of the Guatemalan State.
[29] The Mexican Dirty War and Central American dictatorships, for instance, predate the formal organisation of Operation Condor.
[30] Calloni, *Op. Cit.,* p. 77.

and naming Mexico's as a Dirty War.[31] These critiques range from the history and context of the conflicts and the counter-insurgent persecution to comparing the number of forced disappearances and extra-judicial executions to the difference in regimes. On the first two points, there are substantial arguments that have been made in terms of the irreparable damage of the persecution, detention, torture, and disappearance of any number of people.[32]

The third point does underline the differences between the wars. Whilst the South American countries experiencing Dirty Wars were waged by dictatorships, Mexico was governed by what Daniel Cosío Villegas coined as an "absolute sexennial and hereditary monarchy by transversal line".[33] The ruling party for over seventy years—including those of the Dirty War—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI by its initials in Spanish), was in power from 1929 until 2000. Unlike the South American countries that abolished the previous dictatorships for democratic regimes and conducted processes of remembrance and justice, in Mexico, the change to the right-winged political party National Action Party (PAN) made feeble and ultimately unsuccessful attempts at examining the events of the sixties and seventies.

The alternance of political parties in power, rather than a transition breaking with the former regime, evidences the complex Mexican political system in which PRI managed to win the 2012 elections after two periods of PAN administrations. It further demonstrates the muddled approach given to the history and memory of the Dirty War. However, rather than the mere political form of government—with a similar ability to conduct a counter-insurgent war as explained further on—the most notable element is understanding the connection between certain types of violences in Mexico, not through emphasising the transition between one regime to the other, but by the symbolic continuity concerning the lack of processes of remembrance and justice, as will be developed in chapter five.

Before developing the previous argument, another is pending regarding how Operation Condor was envisioned, developed, and eventually adapted to other contexts. As mentioned earlier, the Mexican Dirty War began before Operation Condor was fully

[31] There have been critical voices calling to stop naming the state crimes of the 70s as a Dirty War in Argentina, for instance, suggesting, instead, State terrorism or State terror.
[32] Laura Castellanos argues that even if the cases of victims were more in Central and South America than in Mexico, it "does not diminish the seriousness of the Mexican events, the brutality of the tortures, or the drama of forced disappearances". Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 323.
[33] Daniel Cosío Villegas, *El sistema político mexicano*, Mexico, Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, S.A., 8th ed., 1972, p. 35.

implemented in late 1975.[34] However, Operation Condor was the precursor or inspiration for the contemporary war on drugs. It consisted of two convergent axes of action directed at different perceived threats from the U.S.: the communist threat and drug trafficking.

That is how, by the end of the decade of the 1970s, Mexico's Ministry for National Defence, in coordination with the U.S., implemented Operation Condor in the Northwest of Mexico to tackle drug trafficking groups in the region.[35] As Adela Cedillo argues in a thorough approach to the anti-narcotics Operation Condor in Mexico, the first stage was situated in the Golden Triangle.[36] However, the significance of this region in the 1970s is further notable for being the birthplace of one of the most active guerrilla groups at the time. The September 23rd Communist League (Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre) was born in early 1973 and had members from Jalisco, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, and Baja California. It was, in Castellanos' words, the most prominent urban organisation as well as the one that had the most impact on public opinion at the time.[37] The League's name refers to an event that happened in 1965 in Chihuahua, which will be addressed further on.

Cedillo argues that through Operation Condor, "the Mexican government applied the counterinsurgency framework forged during the Dirty War to secure sociopolitical and military control over drug growers and traffickers".[38] Both the guerrillas and the drug traffickers were the "twin-headed enemy scattered among the population" that had to be overpowered by any means possible.[39] That is, the tactics that the Mexican State applied to

[34] McSherry, La maquinaria de muerte…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 39.
[35] "During the twentieth century, Mexico-U.S. anti-drug policy evolved from occasional disagreements and clashes to full cooperation from the 1970s onward. The surge in demand for Mexican heroin and marijuana in the United States in the late 1960s, caused by the interruption of the so-called French Connection that supplied heroin from Turkey to the United States, marked a watershed in the binational relationship. The Nixon administration coerced Mexico to change its anti-drug strategy through Operation Intercept (1969), which required a thorough inspection of all vehicles at the U.S.-Mexico border during a time when unregulated air traffic and sea routes were becoming the primary ways of drug smuggling. While this coup de force came as a surprise to the Mexican government, the economic impact of the border shutdown compelled the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz administration (1964–1970) to accept key aspects of the so-called 'war on drugs' by means of Operation Cooperation (1969)". Adela Cedillo, "Operation Condor, The War on Drugs and Counterinsurgency in the Golden Triangle (1977–1983)", Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Working Paper #443, May 2021, p. 1.
[36] This is "where the Sierra Madre Occidental connects the states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua—the region that is the nation's leading producer of marijuana and poppy and the setting of anti-drug campaigns since the 1940s. The Golden Triangle is alternatively known as Golden Quadrilateral when including the state of Sonora, which has also been fertile ground for drug-related activities". *Ibid.,* p. 2.
[37] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 350.
[38] Cedillo, *Op. Cit.,* p. 3.
[39] *Loc. Cit.*

the drug trafficking operations in the Golden Triangle coincided—and were reinforced—by those seeking to eliminate the insurrectionist and guerrilla groups.

Cedillo and Camilo Vicente Ovalle's arguments converge on the fact that Operation Condor was used for terrorising the population since 1975. Vicente Ovalle notes that, since this year, the counter-insurgent strategy implied the spread of state violence. This was particularly evident in police and military checkpoints, tracking operations of militants or guerrilla cells, and social disciplining by the regular military presence. However, Vicente Ovalle argues that Operation Condor created new institutional and material conditions not only in combating the guerrilla but in the "generalisation of counter-insurgent tactics against the population at large".[40] Similarly, for Cedillo, the Operation was a:

> […] half-real, half-simulated anti-drug campaign designed to terrorise the population to ensure the ruling party's dominion, not only in the political field but also in what Alfred McCoy coined the "covert netherworld," an autonomous clandestine realm where organised crime, the secret services, and other elements of the ruling elite compete for economic power and sovereignty.[41]

Journalist and professor Oswaldo Zavala notes that the Mexican drug policy has long been conditioned by its bilateral relationship with the U.S. However, for Zavala, this alone does not explain the power dynamics in each of the countries' relation to the *narco*. Through the findings of journalist Ioan Grillo, Zavala explains that the implementation of Operation Condor in Mexico was done by the decision of the Mexican government to attack leftist groups during the Dirty War by the proximity of the groups with the Mexican Army in Sinaloa and Chihuahua. In this way, Zavala argues, "through Operation Condor, the Mexican state operated what we could consider a brutal but effective biopolitical program carried out by army intelligence work and the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) since Diaz Ordaz's presidential term (1964–1970)".[42] The biopolitical aspect will be discussed further in chapter four.

Vicente Ovalle notes that this beginning in the war against drug trafficking and counterinsurgency provoked profound social and political changes in Mexican society. Returning to the earlier point about the lack of transition between one regime to the other, the practices that resulted in a profound transformation of social, political, and economic realities without a symbolic rupture stand out. Especially in comparison with other South

[40] Camilo Vicente Ovalle, *[Tiempo suspendido]. Una historia de la desaparición forzada en México, 1940-1980,* Mexico City, Bonilla Distribución y Edición S. A. de C. V., 2019, p. 332.
[41] Cedillo, *Op. Cit.,* p. 5.
[42] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 56.

American experiences that confronted their recent past, Mexico has yet to create a sufficiently comprehensive and sustained gap between violences to let them speak. On the contrary, as Vicente Ovalle notes:

> The arbitrary detentions, the use of torture, and disappearances by municipal and judicial police forces were generalised and began to be situated beyond the ideological framework and operational context within counterinsurgency. In addition to the generalisation, new forms of violence began to emerge in this intersection [between counterinsurgency and the beginning of the war against drug trafficking]: it is worth mentioning the routine forms of abduction and disappearance, mainly of women, as well as the appearance of bodies disfigured and with signs of torture in the streets of Culiacán.[43]

These authors' views and arguments have been included to offer, on the one hand, a glimpse into the Cold War geopolitics in Latin America. On the other hand, they are the foundations to understand Mexico's problem today. They situate Mexico's current landscape from the war against guerrillas and insurrectionists—along with the language employed to name them—to the one against drug traffickers by the (bio)politics of their eradication. Hence, the project focuses on the visual and textual traces of memory and mourning since they shape repetitions and help identify systemic, subjective and social characteristics today.

The following section will elaborate on the main events in the Mexican Dirty War through the available images to understand the (eventual) construction of a contextual visual culture marked by silence and invisibility. I follow this in the next section, highlighting the singularities in constructing the *disappearable* and dispensable bodies through their mediatic representation—where there is one—amid a significant national conflict. Here, we begin noticing the imaginary and symbolic construction of the enemy and othered bodies pushed to the outskirts of the social bond: the racialised, discriminated, abject, and persecuted ones to date.

A power's precursory path to forgetting

In his 2007 book, the *Recurrent Guerrilla* (La guerrilla recurrente), Carlos Montemayor argues that Mexico has lived in an almost uninterrupted state of war since at

[43] Vicente Ovalle, *Op. Cit.,* p. 332.

least the morning of 23 September 1965.[44] This is the date of the assault on the Madera Barracks when a group of thirteen young guerrilla fighters attempted to seize the military headquarters of Ciudad Madera in the mountains of Chihuahua. Based on Che Guevara's manual *Guerrilla Warfare*, this group wanted to implement the country's first *foco*—a small nucleus of revolutionaries.[45]

After Arturo Gámiz arrived in the state of Chihuahua, he became an active component in the movement against the injustices in the state. When relocating to the municipality of Madera in the Northern state of Chihuahua, Gámiz taught at a school repurposed by local *caciques*[46] from former horse stables. Gámiz's motivations to install a *foco* stemmed from a profound discontent with extractive politics in the region, whereby foreign companies "took all the resources and left only ruin, bare hills, and nostalgia".[47] Another reason was that the poverty lived in the state was not only rooted in the lack of work in the mines but was actively imposed and entrenched in an empire of murderers, the *cacicazgo*.[48]

According to Castellanos, attacking the Madera Barracks aimed to acquire weapons, expropriate the local bank, and transmit revolutionary messages through the local station. Afterwards, following Che Guevara's manual, they were to retire again to the mountain range.[49] In the early morning of 23 September, they began firing at the soldiers preparing for breakfast. The soldiers fired back, and when the *guerrilleros* tried to retreat, they could not. The soldiers gained control of the barracks with relative ease, and eight of the guerrilleros died that day during the failed assault. Their bodies were placed next to each other on the ground and photographed.

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[44] Carlos Montemayor, *La guerrilla recurrente,* Mexico City, Random House Mondadori, S. A. de C. V., 2007, p. 24.
[45] Ernesto Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare. Authorised edition,* Melbourne, Ocean Press, 2006, p. 13.
[46] According to Lorenzo Meyer, the word cacique is a corruption of the word *kassequa,* an 'arahuaco' word used to name the indigenous leaders that Cristóbal Colón encountered in 1492. Lorenzo Meyer, "Los caciques: ayer, hoy y ¿mañana?", in *Revista Letras Libres*, no. 24, n.p.
[47] Tanalís Padilla, "Arturo Gámiz: su clase de agitación" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2021/12/06/opinion/018a1pol).
[48] *Loc. Cit.* "*Caciquismo* can be defined provisionally as a type of local, informal politics in the Hispano-American area that involves partially arbitrary control by a relatively small association of individuals under one leader. A *cacicazgo* is a concrete instance of *caciquismo*. The leader in either case is the *cacique*. *Caciquismo* is a clear-cut and historically important phenomenon, long recognized by the Mexicans as a national social problem with serious economic and legal implications". Paul Friedrich, "A Mexican Cacicazgo", in *Ethnology,* vol. 4, no. 2, p. 190.
[49] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 63.

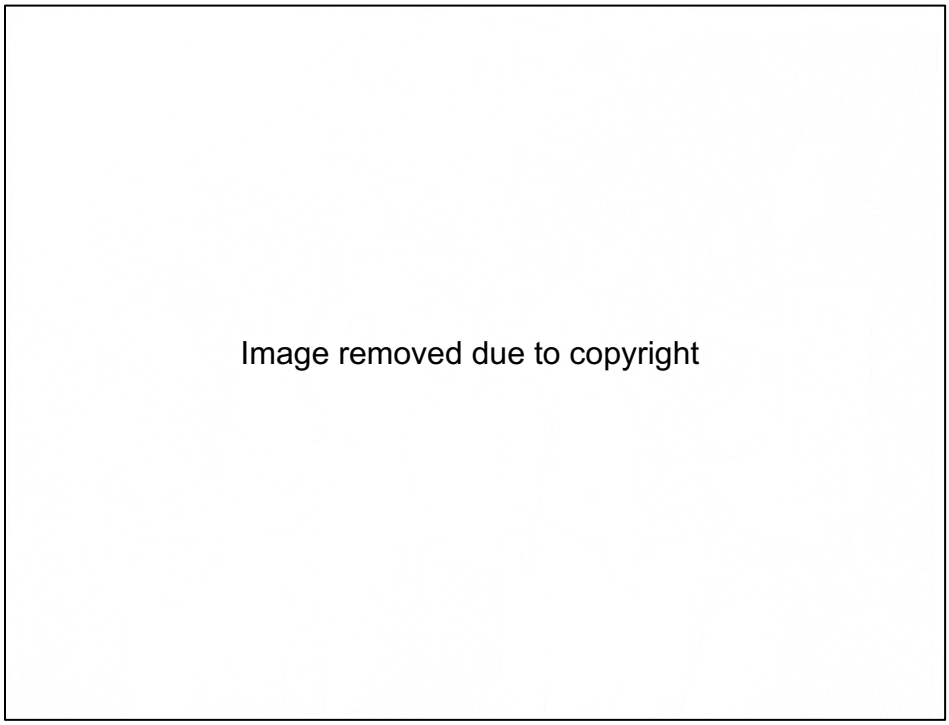

Image 1

The text in the image reads: "The six cadavers that were left in the mass grave: Antonio Scobell, peasant; Ramón Sandoval, student; Arturo Gámiz (?), professor; Rafael Martínez Valdivia, professor; Pablo Gómez Ramírez, physician; Miguel Quiñones, professor; Emilio Gámiz, poet".[50]

This image is part of an article published in *Sucesos para todos* journal on 15 October 1965—three weeks after the event. The image and the small text are remarkable, albeit for different reasons. Even though a deeper investigation into previous images depicting violent acts would be required to fully ascertain the widespread use of images of violence before 1965, images of death or accidents were not new. The long history of the *nota roja*, which will be addressed in chapter two, is evidence of the scopic drive that motivates these types of publications. However, this image—and the event[51]—is significant because it can be considered the inaugurating moment of the Dirty War, especially in its visual representation.

[50] Image can be found in: Víctor Rico Galán, "Chihuahua: de la desesperación a la muerte", in *Sucesos para todos*, no. 1693, 15 October 1965, p. 17. This image is part of the archival research I conducted at Hemeroteca Nacional de México (from here on HMN) in January and February 2023.

[51] Carlos Illades and Teresa Santiago argue that with the failed attempt at seizing the Madera Barracks, the regime of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz formed the Group for Special Investigations

In terms of the language used to convey the event, it is noteworthy how three news articles that reported on the event all show an incipient discourse that would frame the war—and how they differ from Rico Galán's in *Sucesos para todos*. On Saturday, 25 September, the newspaper Excélsior merely published an article saying that with the death of the three leaders of Arturo Gámiz's *gavilla*[52], peace came to the town of Madera. Notably, whilst this article does not include images nor talks more about the event, paragraphs three and four of the article tellingly set the tone for the language that would be commonly employed when referring to students, teachers, rural and indigenous leaders, or rural and urban guerrilla fighters in the following years:

> The funerals of the five soldiers who died yesterday in the hands of the outlaws who attempted to seize the ranch were carried out today [24th of September] at 14:30 hours in the cemetery of the municipality of Madera. One hundred soldiers paid tribute.
>
> The cadavers of the bandits were thrown into the mass grave.[53]

The newspaper *El Universal* was relatively more restrained in the language they used to describe what happened in Madera and, importantly, what led to the attack.[54] They mention the complaints made over the previous year. However, they did not refrain from using the word 'bandit'—*bandolero* in Spanish—to refer to the group led by Arturo Gámiz. The word *bandolero* jumps out as another one—more reminiscent of the previous century[55]—that reads as the incipient attempts at naming something not quite fitting in the order of experience with other known figures, such as the bandit.

Although *El Porvenir,* a newspaper from the Northern state of Nuevo Léon, likewise called them *gavilla,* it also recognised them as communist guerrilla fighters and named the

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C-047 of the infamous Federal Security Directorate (Dirección Federal de Seguridad or DFS in Spanish). With the creation of this special force—"an unscrupulous police apparatus in human rights matters and immune to any legal control"—, the authors argue, the first foundation for the Dirty War was placed. Carlos Illades and Teresa Santiago, *Estado de guerra. De la guerra sucia a la narcoguerra*, Mexico City, Ediciones Era, S. A. de C. V., 2014, p. 37.

[52] The word gavilla, according to Rosalina Ríos Zúñiga, was used in the nineteenth century to refer, in a derogatory way, to the "'heaps' of men or gavilleros who, according to authorities, dedicated their time to stealing, abducting, and killing in rural Mexico". Rosalina Ríos Zúñiga, "Resistencia o poder. El papel de las gavillas en la lucha por el poder en México. Zacatecas, 1848-1872", XI Jornadas Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia. Departamento de Historia. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Universidad de Tucumán, San Miguel de Tucumán, 2007, p. 1.

[53] "Tranquilidad en Madera, Chihuahua", in *Excelsior,* 25 September 25, 1965, p. 11-A.

[54] "La Conducta del Cacique en Madera propició la Rebelión en Chihuahua", in *El Universal,* 24 September, 1965, p. 10.

[55] See Pablo Alberto Escalante Piña, "Bandolerismo en Latinoamérica y México: una revisión historiográfica", in *Revista Electrónica de Fuentes y Archivos (REFA),* year 8, no. 8.

organisation to which they were affiliated, UGOCM, General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico. In this article, they allude to the agrarian problems that led to the social discontent, yet they argue that the communists capitalised on a certain popular discontent towards the state's authorities for their advantage.[56]

Even if these three articles did not include any images, the detailed—and nearly matching—recount of the facts paints a vivid mental picture. They relied on familiar figures known to Mexicans—paired with classist and racist prejudices implying that their physical appearance, origin, and socioeconomic class explain their "banditry"—to create signifiers comprising a curious mixture of word and image, some of which would take hold in the social imaginary, and others becoming metaphors or metonymies. However, returning to Víctor Rico Galán's article in *Sucesos para todos,* which does include images, a fuller picture begins to appear, not only due to the inclusion of images but through the detailed explanation of these images.

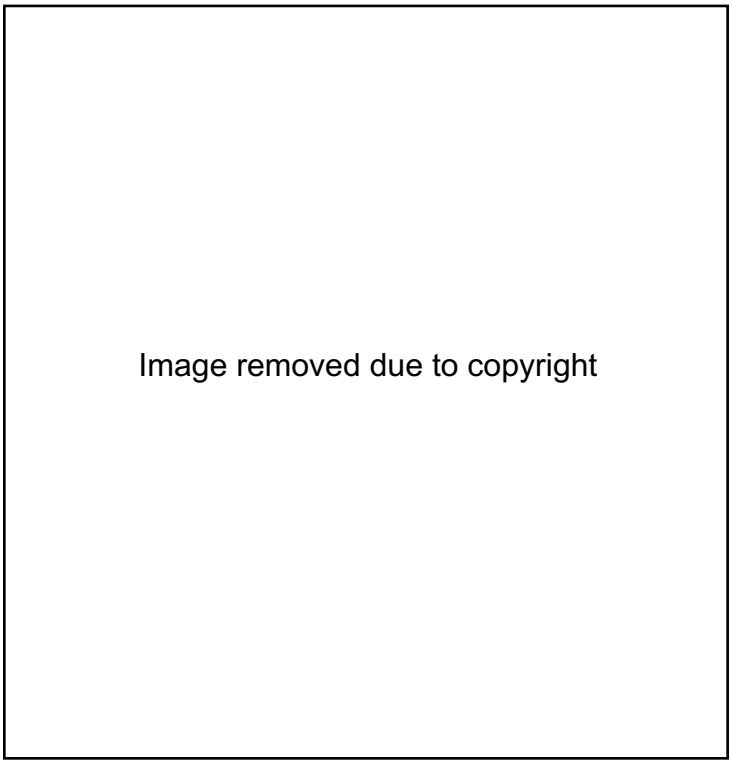

Image 2[57]

[56] "GAVILLA. Estalla Bomba Casera en Manos del Cabecilla Gámiz", in *El Porvenir,* 24 September, 1965, p. 9.

[57] Image can be found in: Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, "37 años del asalto al cuartel Madera" (FROM, 12 February, 2023: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2002/09/23/056n1con.php). The image in question is the second one in the article.

Rico Galán travelled to Madera to report on the occurrences of the attack to the barracks. He challenged and contradicted the official military version—something not done in the years of enforced and reluctant silence over anything negative about the president. He wrote:

> For the Federal Security Directorate, nothing has happened; everything is calm now. However, the Major General Práxedis Giner Durán, constitutional governor of the state of Chihuahua, was more explicit. Here is the declaration he made to the press regarding the bloody events in Madera: "Nothing has happened, absolutely nothing. That which they say happened is like we were here talking and then we go home. Like that, nothing ever was…"[58]

Returning to image 1 and its slightly sharper version in image 2, we can grasp how the soldiers threw the dead bodies into the common grave. Not only *see* but follow the narrative in the sense of going from point A—the moment the soldiers managed to regain control of the barracks and kill the group[59]—to point B—placing their bodies one next to the other. However, there are two outstanding elements to note in the transcription under image 1—since the text is more legible in this image. The first concerns the radical and caring act of naming the bodies and stating their professions. The second, not unrelated to the first, is the curious question mark next to Arturo Gámiz's name.

Naming is the subjective recognition of the self and the other. In Jacques Lacan's Seminar IX, his explanation or proposition for the proper name links the two points above. The characteristic of the proper name, he says, "is always more or less linked to this trait of its liaison not to the sound, but to the writing".[60] So, where the deadly power aims at disappearing and annihilating every trace of the existence of the disappeared, tortured, or murdered, returning to the proper name of the subject, the incorporation of the possession of the name implies a shelter or refuge to the humiliation of being denied a resting place, a grave, a place for the body to remain and be mourned.

Pausing briefly on the small box with the text and considering that there are no random or arbitrary acts in any stage of producing and reproducing an image, what is it doing there, location-wise? Regardless of the actual text, the names of each person appearing in the order of the bodies, the little box appears as a disruption in and of the

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[58] Rico Galán, *Op. Cit.,* p. 15.
[59] Rico Galán expressly refrained from naming them guerrilleros because "they did not live in the mountains, had no equipment for that, no weapons, no training… they conducted isolated actions and then dispersed, reliant on the peasants' solidarity, today more alive than ever". *Ibid.,* p. 26.
[60] Jacques Lacan, *The seminar. Book IX, Identification,* Unpublished, 1961, 1962, p. 56.

image. Its location, at the centre bottom of the page, placed over Emilio Gámiz's torso, partially conceals his body.

Being presented with the choice of placing that little box elsewhere in the image—bottom left corner or top right corner, for instance—its disruption here is noticeable. It seems to act both as a weight acting over the gravity of the bodies and a border in the fringe between the frame of the image or paper and the space beyond. In practical terms, this box could mean nothing more than the careless placing of a mark or trace in an unfortunate place. However, even if unconscious or unfathomable, every trace has a signifier articulation.

Not only does the preoccupation of writing and showing, naming and hiding correspond to the very tensions of text and image, but it also exemplifies W. J. Thomas Mitchell's hyphen in image-text, which will be explored further in the chapter. However, the question mark next to Arturo Gámiz's name also has a symbolic effect beyond the text: in history's reality. How is the question mark, within the white box, within the image meant to be assimilated or understood? On its own, it has to do with the possibility of it not being Gámiz's body. As Rico Galán explains at the end of the article and shows up close in the following image:

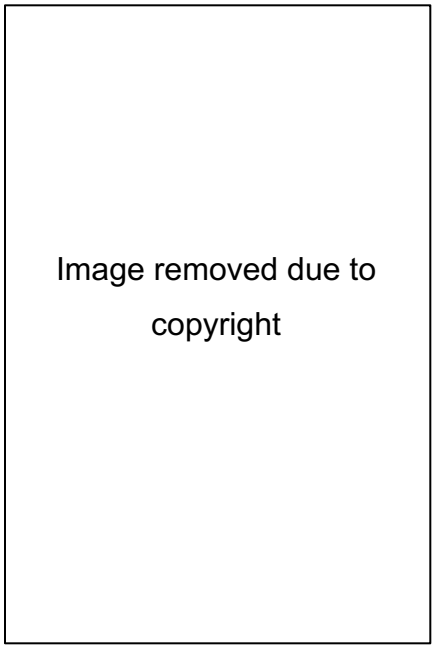

Image 3[61]

"Is this Arturo Gámiz? Is this the beginning of the legend?"

"In the meantime, over the whole land of Chihuahua, over the mountains and plains, the legend of Arturo Gámiz forms and grows. People refuse to believe his death. There are serious testimonies of responsible people who knew him well that the body exhibited in Madera was his. There are other testimonies of people likewise worthy of credit that assure that it is not him. His mother, who undoubtedly identified his other son Emilio's body, vehemently denies that Arturo is dead. Is this the truth? Is this a legend being born?

The Cid won battles after death".[62]

[61] Image can be found in: Rico Galán, *Op. Cit.,* p. 26.
[62] *Loc. Cit*.

Even if inadvertently, the image disseminated in Rico Galán's article exemplifies two oppositions in the use of images of violence in violent conflicts or contexts. The same [non-consensual] use of the image of the dead body and face of Gámiz was used as an exemplary demonstration of the State's power in suppressing the rebellion. Likewise, it was used as both evidence of the State's excessive use of force against the population and a symbol of the return of the struggle.

Following the failed attack on the barracks, the bodies of the dead fighters were exhibited in Madera's main square to "frighten anyone who pretended to fight the government and the army".[63] Moreover, according to Rico Galán, the bodies were openly paraded across the town in an open-topped cargo truck before being thrown into the common grave. To this, Governor Giner Durán claimed that "since it is soil they fought for, give them soil until they are fed up with it".[64] Simultaneously, whilst Giner Durán was outwardly saying that "nothing happened", the army arrested and tortured peasants in Madera, searching for the rest of the "gavilleros".[65]

On the other hand, Rico Galán gives another point of view from the incursion to the mountains of Chihuahua to find out what really happened. Following his reflections, exposed in image 3, the image of Gámiz's face is presumably published in opposition to the official versions. The government and the army killed eight young people, paraded their bodies across the town, tortured peasants in search of survivors, and refused to give the bodies a proper burial or even allow their families to do so. Thus, they were actively impeding the grieving process by making the bodies ungrievable.

The image of the face of the dead will become commonly used by power discourses throughout the Dirty War. It will signify both power and discipline and persecution and resistance. Thinking back to the quotation in image 3 and the question mark next to Gámiz's name in images 1 and 2, there can be different interpretations. It can refer to the degree of certainty of his death because of the blow to the head Gámiz received, or it can refer to the realness of the body being Gámiz's or his death in the metaphorical sense of him living on as a legend, as a symbol; his legacy in the inter-after-life, not-yet dead and no-longer-alive.

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[63] Doralicia Carmona, "Ataque al cuartel militar de ciudad Madera, Chihuahua" (FROM, 16 February, 2023: https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Efemerides/9/23091965.html).
[64] The original phrase in Spanish was "puesto que era tierra lo que peleaban, denles tierra hasta que se harten". In Spanish, the word "tierra" can mean both the land and the soil. Giner Durán was playing on that double meaning, implying the fight for access to the land and the soil used to cover their bodies in the common grave. Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 81.
[65] Rico Galán, *Op. Cit.,* p. 18.

These are the two senses in which the face will be used: as proof of the defeat and a claim of struggle and remembrance.

However, a certain wariness should arise from considering Gámiz's death and his visual reproduction as a symbol. Such a critique was posed by Derrida, referring to the assassination of Chris Hani, who warns us about treating the death, or assassination, of a man as a symbol:

> But one should never speak of the assassination of a man as a figure, not even an exemplary figure in the logic of an emblem, a rhetoric of the flag or of martyrdom. A man's life, as unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol. And this is precisely what a proper name should always name.[66]

Considering Derrida's subsequent sentences explaining Hani's assassination as one of a "communist", what a proper name should always name further tenses the relationship between the name, the image, and, no longer unimportantly, the profession or occupation as a noun.[67] Why include the up-close image, if the face is to a degree unrecognisable enough to doubt its name? If the question is one of Gámiz's legacy and its simultaneously undying and reviving presence through this image, is this asking too much of either image or name? However, Derrida further analyses another perspective in *Specters of Marx* when Hamlet learns from Horatio about the appearance of the king's ghost*:* the need to know.

> First of all, mourning. We will be speaking of nothing else. It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the question of the specter, to the specter, whether it be Hamlet's or Marx's, on this near side of such thinking). One has to know. *One has to know it*. *One has to have knowledge* [Il faut le savoir]. Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. Hamlet does not ask merely to whom the skull belonged ("Whose was it?" the question that Valéry quotes). He demands to know to whom the grave belongs ("Whose grave's this, sir?"). Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know*

[66] Jacques Derrida*, Specters of Marx*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. xiv.
[67] Bearing the differences between Chris Hani and Arturo Gámiz, Derrida's thoughts on the persecution of the former lead to thinking of the political persecution of Gámiz's persecution, the signifiers employed to justify that persecution, and the different discourses that can be made of a man's life and death.

> who is buried where—and it is *necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there*. Let him stay there and move no more![68]

Even though Rico Galán's words veer in the opposite direction, towards an uncertainty of death, of this being Gámiz's face, and therefore his body, the right to take a life for the purpose of something greater, the curious question mark placed next to his name, and before the noun, introduces a sign that reverses that confusion towards a different direction. The interrogation functions as a sign of the knot whereby, in the real, lies Gámiz's dead body, in the imaginary a hero or legend, and in the symbolic the '?' uniting image and text, a phantasmatic tension: the spectre seeing *us.* The interrogation further represents the need to know, to make sure that this is, in fact, his body and can have a grave that is his, as Derrida suggests above.[69]

This last idea leads to pondering the other side of the question mark mentioned above: not on its own, but as part of a system of representation that shapes the subjectivities of those involved in the armed fight and those who witness it. The image, the box, the text, and the question mark are not arbitrary or innocuous elements. Together, they imply a system of representation and communication that is not a priori intelligible or equipped with a pre-ordained meaning.

W. J. Thomas Mitchell discards the categorical separation between words and images and advocates for a different kind of critical approximation to these instead. One where the hyphen between image-text acquires a bidirectional horizontal quality. Rather than the hierarchical relationship of the word over image or vice versa, the questions over the image/text, imagetext, image-text evidence the fissures in their relationship. Viewed from either side, visual or verbal, Mitchell says:

> The medium of *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the "literal" (letters) and the "figurative" (pictures) on which it depends. Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the "imagetext" incarnate.[70]

The trace, the remains, and the lack in a Lacanian sense, for Sergio Martínez Luna, are indices of the impossibility of human language to breach into the object's ontological

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[68] *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[69] Here, I wish to underline a premise that has become evident throughout this research: where the face was predominant in the earlier images during the Dirty War, this tendency changes with the war against drug trafficking. In the latter, the face is mainly shown in an abject and horrifying dissection from the rest of the body; that is, the face, up close, is shown mainly in decapitations. *Ibid.,* p. 125.
[70] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory,* United States of America, The University of Chicago Press, 1995*,* p. 95.

reality fully.[71] Thus, I suggest the following question to guide the rest of the text: can Rico Galán's closing questions, the question mark 'image-?-text' in the text, and the image all be opening the questioning of the very possibility of memory and mourning? The possibility of the image perduring in time and the psychic appeasement that a body is, in fact, there in the existence of the image—even if the uncertainty of its identification remains.

Whilst the image is hardly a grave and the camera is no substitution for eyes seeing—and knowing—a body to be in its final resting place, the existence of a photograph of the dead reveals itself to be *something*. This *something* depends on the uses given to the image, and this is of particular concern in light of the events to come in the war, where images of violence veer more towards spectacle than mourning. However, thinking of forced disappearances that lack even that insufficient, duplicitous, yet *real* trace, we can think of the camera not as a substitute for the process of memory but as a signal that points to the traces where we can find remembrance.

The traces of the Madera barracks' attack acquire a notorious significance with more recent events in Mexico. The disappearance of 43 students in Guerrero in 2014 is not the same type of event because the exercised violence is neither comparable nor a representation and much less a re-enactment of the facts. However, the trigger of the trace has to do more with the tradition of *normalistas*—student teachers from *escuelas normales* or normal schools[72]—and students being historically systematically repressed.

Humiliation: a governmental strategy

One of the best-known episodes of the Dirty War is the Tlatelolco Massacre of 2 October 1968. The student massacre represents, to this day, one of the country's foremost before-and-after events. It is etched in Mexico's history and memory as one of the bloodiest and most exemplary representations of PRI's abuse of power at that time. Furthermore, it is a constant point of return referring to its occurrence, comparing it to present-day events and as an event whose traces and repetitions can be seen today.

[71] Sergio Martínez Luna, *Cultura visual. La pregunta por la imagen,* Vitoria-Gasteiz, Sans Soleil Ediciones, 2019, p. 35.
[72] The *normalista* schools throughout Mexico are centres dedicated to forming future teachers with undergraduate educational degrees.

Unlike three years earlier, when images of the Madera attack were scarce and had to be pursued by Rico Galán and his team, images from the student massacre in 1968 were more accessible. At least three elements assured the widespread communication of the massacre. First, the preponderance of Mexico City in the country's social, political, economic, and cultural life implied its covering by local and national media. Second, the magnitude of the repression. Third, the imminent inauguration of the Olympic games in the capital only ten days after the massacre.

Regarding the events of 2 October, unlike the Chihuahua case, the quantity of articles from different sources, with or without images, makes the task of singling out different traces and articulating them into this project's research question more complex. Image 4 presents a suggestive point of departure to address the images of this event. In the 1960s, according to Castellanos, the flag of the democratic struggle was hoisted particularly by the youth with access to normal rural schools and middle and high schools in the cities. This was, Castellanos continues, partly because the Mexican student circuits were familiar with the time's youth rebellion and women's increasing political participation.[73]

The region's revolutionary context during the 1960s, together with the deacceleration of the Mexican miracle[74], the aggravated crisis in the countryside, the increasing repression against social movements, and the impossibility of enacting changes through electoral means, mark, according to Castellanos, the uprising of taking arms.[75] Thus, in the face of the 1968 Olympic Games, the incipient movements, strikes, and overall discontent fostered the government's fear of a "communist combat" that could endanger the "apparent social peace, private investments, and international loans".[76]

[73] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 169.
[74] This economic period (1954-1970), also known as the Stabilising Development, was a development strategy centred on a fiscal policy of monetary stabilisation. Mexico saw "sustained growth combined with monetary stability, there was an increase in manufacturing and oil-exploitation industries, workers' real wages increased, the public expenditure in education and health increased, and the country began defining itself as a consumer society". *Ibid.,* p. 168.
[75] *Ibid.,* p. 169.
[76] Archivo General de la Nación, "#AGNResguarda memorias de la época del Desarrollo estabilizador" (FROM, 12 February, 2023: https://www.gob.mx/agn/es/articulos/agnresguarda-memorias-de-la-epoca-del-desarrollo-estabilizador?idiom=es).

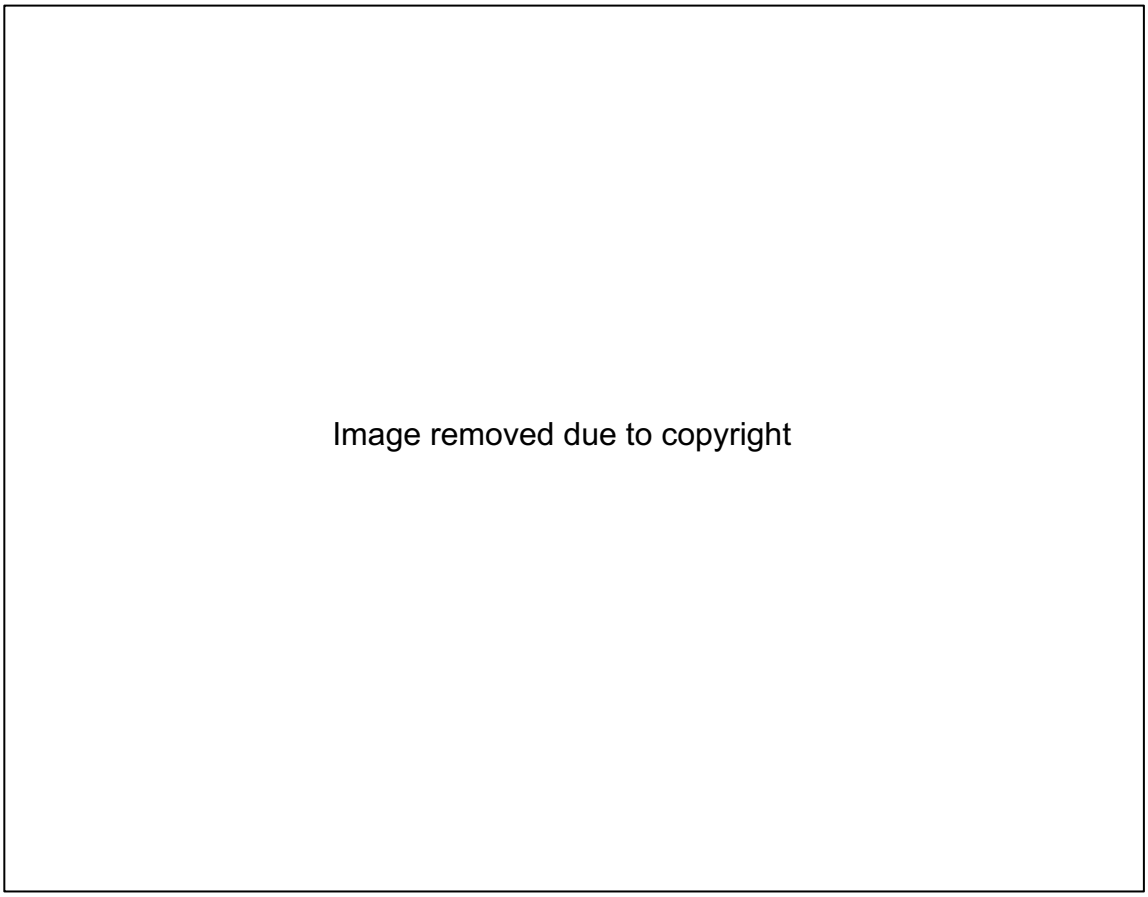

Image 4[77]

Earlier that year, on 22 July, the riot police intervened in a fight between gangs and students from two vocational schools. The indignation led to a manifestation on 26 July[78], which was intruded by shock groups popularly known as *porros*[79] in Spanish.[80] The consecutive incursion of the army into the National Autonomous University of Mexico

[77] Image can be found in: Virgina Marisol Escobedo Aguirre, *Imagen, memoria y política: el 68 desde (el uso de) sus fotografías* (thesis), Mexico, CIESAS, 2012, p. 191, "fotografía 62", who cites "Tlatelolco 2 de octubre de 1968. Fotografía perteneneciente al *Excélsior,* 3 de octubre de 1968, p. 14-A, IISUE-AHUNAM, Fondo Hemerografía del movimiento estudiantil de 1968, caja 5". The image in question can also be found in the upper-left corner of: Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971), "Unidad documental simple HM68_069 - HM68_069" (FROM, 23 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-069).
[78] Marking the attack of Moncada Barracks by Fidel Castro in 1953.
[79] *Porros* are "mercenary shock groups associated with internal political organizations used to break up protests violently". Telesur, "Mexico: UNAM Students March Against 'Mercenary' Shock Groups" (FROM, 23 February, 2023: https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Mexican-Students-Protest-Against-Shock-Groups-Porros-20180905-0029.html).
[80] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 170.

(UNAM) and the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN) led to the creation of the National Strike Council (CNH), which called for several protests with the support of academics, intellectuals, and parents.[81]

Following a series of government offensive strategies against the students, the student repression lived its worst moment with the massacre of 2 October 1968. On this day, a mass meeting was to take place in the *Three Cultures Square* (Plaza de las Tres Culturas) at 5 p.m. Depending on different sources, the number of assistants who gathered to hear the student speakers ranged from five to ten thousand, including students, families, and supporters of the student movement.[82] The number of assistants, deaths, and disappearances remains unknown. As Castellanos recounts, the meeting was:

> Enclosed by soldiers and military vehicles, snipers with high-powered weapons, officers from the Presidential General Staff hiding in flats near the square, and officers of the Olympia Battalion dressed in plain clothes wearing a white glove or kerchief as a type of passcode, who were located in the stairs and hallways leading to the entrance of the building. Two emergency flares were released from a helicopter and served as a sign for a sniper to shoot against General José Hernández Toledo, thus justifying the military attack against the defenceless crowd.[83]

As mentioned, on 3 October, several newspapers reported on the previous day's events. Some included images alongside official or incorrect facts on the occurrence and number of dead, incarcerated or disappeared people. Although the intention of this project is not to conduct research and analysis of what each media depicted in its publications of the events, it is important to stress that many of these documents have been unearthed in recent times by historians and other academics who have published texts contradicting and evidencing the tendentious publications of the time.

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[81] *Loc. Cit.*

[82] Castellanos estimates 5,000 attendants, *Ibid.,* p. 171. John Rodda (The Guardian reporter present during the massacre) initially reported 5,000 but called it a conservative figure, Richard Nelsson, "How the Guardian reported Mexico City's Tlatelolco massacre of 1968" (FROM, 23 February, 2023:https://www.theguardian.com/cities/from-the-archive-blog/2015/nov/12/guardian-mexico-tlatelolco-massacre-1968-john-rodda). Lynne Ann Hartnett situates the number at 10,000 (Lynne Ann Hartnett , "Mexico: The 1968 Student Movement and Tlatelolco Massacre" (FROM, 23 February, 2023: https://www.wondriumdaily.com/mexico-the-1968-student-movement-and-tlatelolco-massacre/).

[83] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 171.

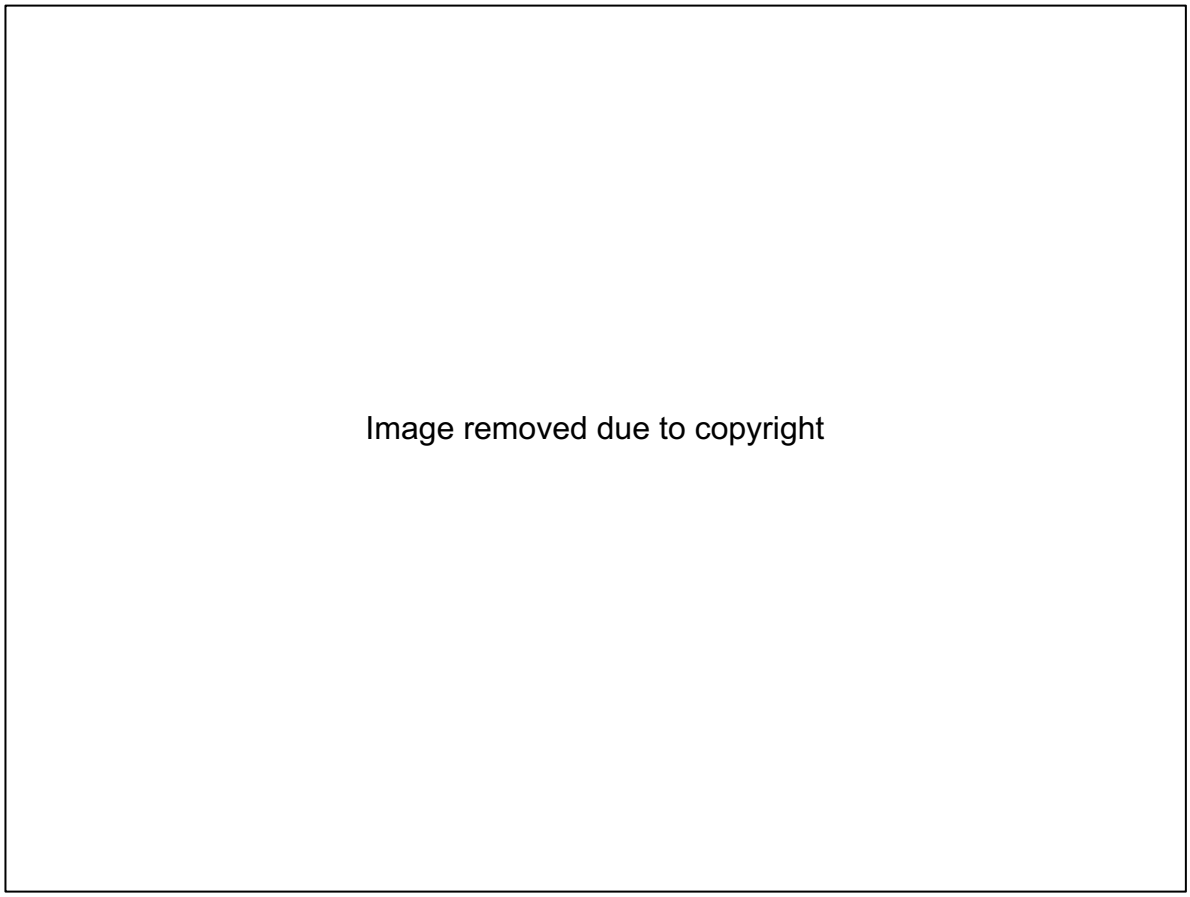

Image 5[84]

Unlike Madera or occurrences in rural Mexico, there was no way to ignore an event of such magnitude in the capital of the country, one that had been gestating months earlier and so near to the Olympic games' inauguration. Image 5 is a compilation of the covers of some newspapers that published articles on the events of 2 October 1968. It is apparent from these that many—perhaps under government orders, as the article suggests—framed the massacre as "a brawl between rioters, or as a confrontation with 'terrorists', or 'an army trap'".[85] Castellanos suggests that only three media outlets told the truth about the

[84] Image can be found in: Regeneración, "Masacre del 2 octubre según los periódicos en 1968" (FROM, 12 February, 2023: https://regeneracion.mx/masacre-del-2-octubre-segun-los-periodicos-en-1968/). The image in question is the first one of the article.
[85] *Loc. Cit.*

massacre—*Excélsior, Por qué?* magazine, and *Siempre!*[86]. Virginia M. Escobedo Aguirre adds *Life* magazine in Spanish to this list.[87]

Even though *El Universal* published images of the massacre—including detained, hurt, and dead students and children—having access to these images does not necessarily correspond to factual or critical accounts. As Escobedo Aguirre argues, this newspaper highlighted the army's commendable role. For *El Universal,* "the armed forces were repelling the snipers' aggression, the images 'proved' this".[88]

Returning to images 4 and 6, newspaper *Excélsior* included a footnote on this image reading, "Smiling, three soldiers and a lieutenant begin cutting the long hair of one of the detainees in the building of Chihuahua, of Santiago Tlatelolco. In the background, against the wall and with hands behind their heads, are several detainees".[89] Image 6, as image 4 also shows, can be found, without footnote, in several articles regarding the 2 October 1968 massacre.[90] On its own, as can easily be found in digital searches, and situated earlier on purpose, this image is telling, but the footnote, whilst not changing its perspective, includes a context within the broader context.

Image removed due to copyright

Image 6[91]

[86] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 171.
[87] Escobedo Aguirre, *Op. Cit.*, p. 21.
[88] *Ibid.,* p. 39.
[89] *Ibid.,* p. 40.
[90] Such as here: https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2018/10/03/mexico/1538531197_926166.html.
[91] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-069).

The firm grip over his full head of hair while pulling him by the shoulder in another direction, the other detained people with their back to the camera, the soldier on the right suggesting a mix of abstraction, ease, and tension. However, the smiling soldier is the inevitable element that draws the gaze centre stage.[92] Is it only the natural reaction to witnessing a camera about to take one's photograph? Is it the pleasure derived from the moment, the power he was enacting, and the pain and fear from the student? We will never know the exact cause for this smile—the soldier might not have consciously known himself—but it is a haunting gesture.

The smile does not fade, does not lie, yet does not tell the truth, except for the opposites experienced at that moment. It signals an absence by its rotund presence. The student's face is not visible, but we can assume he is in pain, scared or angry. He was being humiliated before a camera that he could not face himself. The soldier behind him, for whatever reason, is smiling. His smile signifies what cannot be seen in what is seen. Not through directly alternating positions, smile and grimace, for no one could be smiling in this image. The smile metonymizes a dreadful and cruel secret for the years to come, one to be known only in the *après-coup*. It is the smiling, triumphant face that shadows an unknown one.

Is the information regarding the imminent haircut necessary to understand the image? The response to this will, inevitably, be ambivalent. The same question can be asked of all the images included throughout, many of which do not have the opportunity of being situated in something other than what they show—if there is such a thing—, or the discourses they reproduce. Thus, these are supplementary questions for this dissertation. Does the image stand on its own? No. Can it stand on its own in different articles? Yes. The image itself is not lying or deceiving, but there is a depth to it not immediately perceived.

Perhaps the depth is concealed in that dominant smile or in the fact that it is an image known to be about the 2 October 1968 massacre. Its depth is not even about the fact that the grip over his head signified an imminent haircut and not just brutal force used to subdue a detainee; no scissors can be seen in the image to explain this. The depth is not about the linearity of events, from *point A* to *point B,* gripping his hair in the image to cutting it in a time outside the image, but in the gesture piercing through the possibility of knowing what was being written.

Georges Didi-Huberman writes that the image burns with the real to which, at some point, it came close. It burns, he says, by the desire animating it, the destruction and burning

[92] This is reminiscent of Butler's discussion of Abu Ghraib's images, which will be addressed below.

it survived, by its glare and the possibility of its very burning, by its unstoppable movement, its audacity burning everything behind it, and the pain it comes from that, at the same time, ensures sharing with everyone who bothers embracing it. However, he says, it burns for its memory, "that is, it does not stop burning, even when it is no more than ashes: it is a form of expressing its fundamental vocation of surviving, of saying: and yet…".[93]

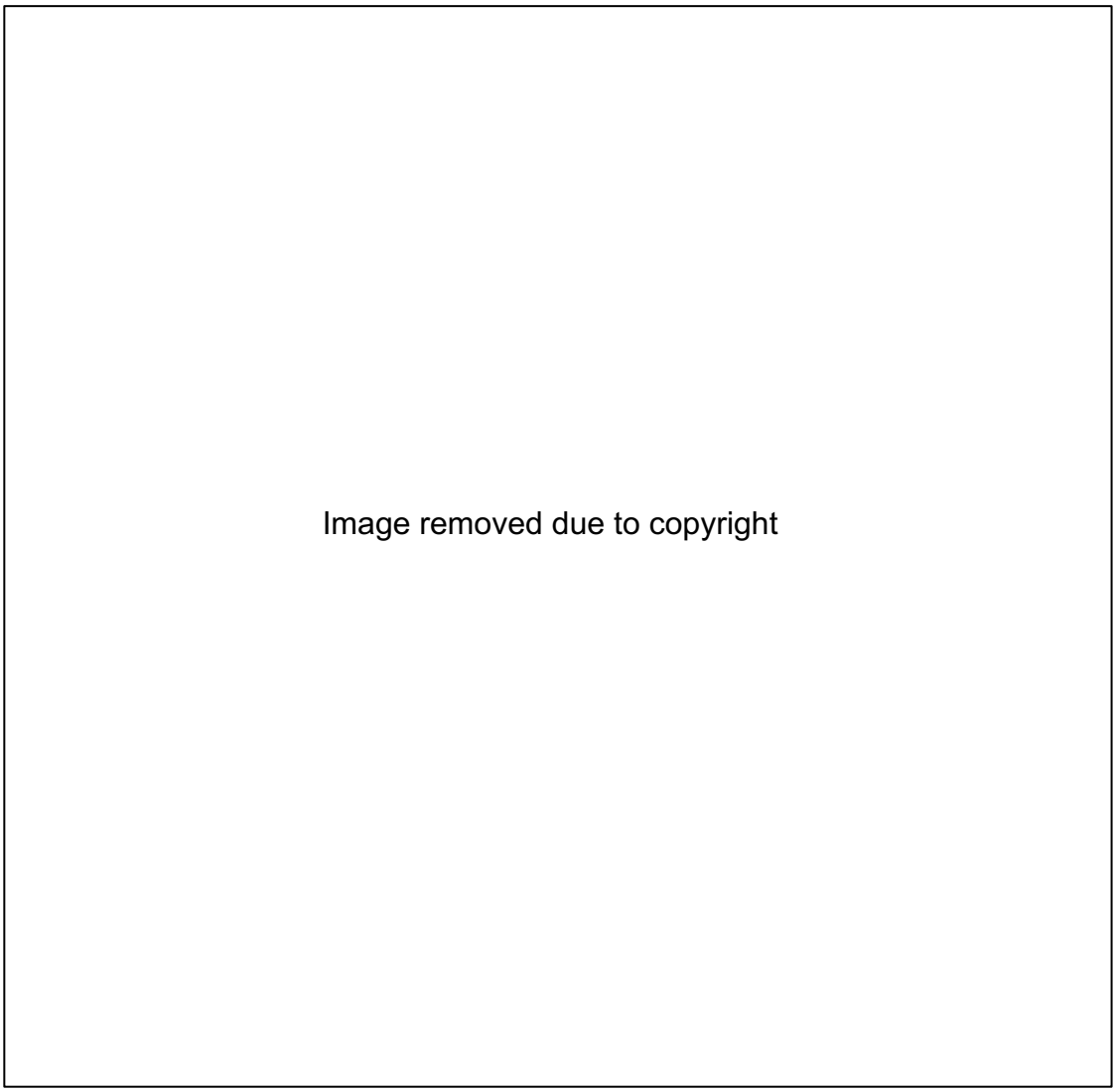

Image 7[94]

[93] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Arde la imagen,* Oaxaca, serieve, 2012, p. 42.
[94] Image can be found in: Sanjuana Martínez, "2 de octubre: imágenes de un fotógrafo del gobierno", in *Proceso,* no. 1310, p. 16.

One of the gestures transcending this image is that of the will to humiliate the other, the captive other, the subdued other. The smiling soldier in image 4; the stripped young people, made to stand against the wall with their arms outstretched above them over puddles of dark liquid in image 7; a half-naked young man, beaten, with bruises, scratches, and blood over his face and body, with no trousers, shirt and jacket hanging from his arms that, from this perspective, appear to be behind his back, surrounded by soldiers in image 8. In a way, all these images have in common the visuality of the humiliation of the overpowered other.

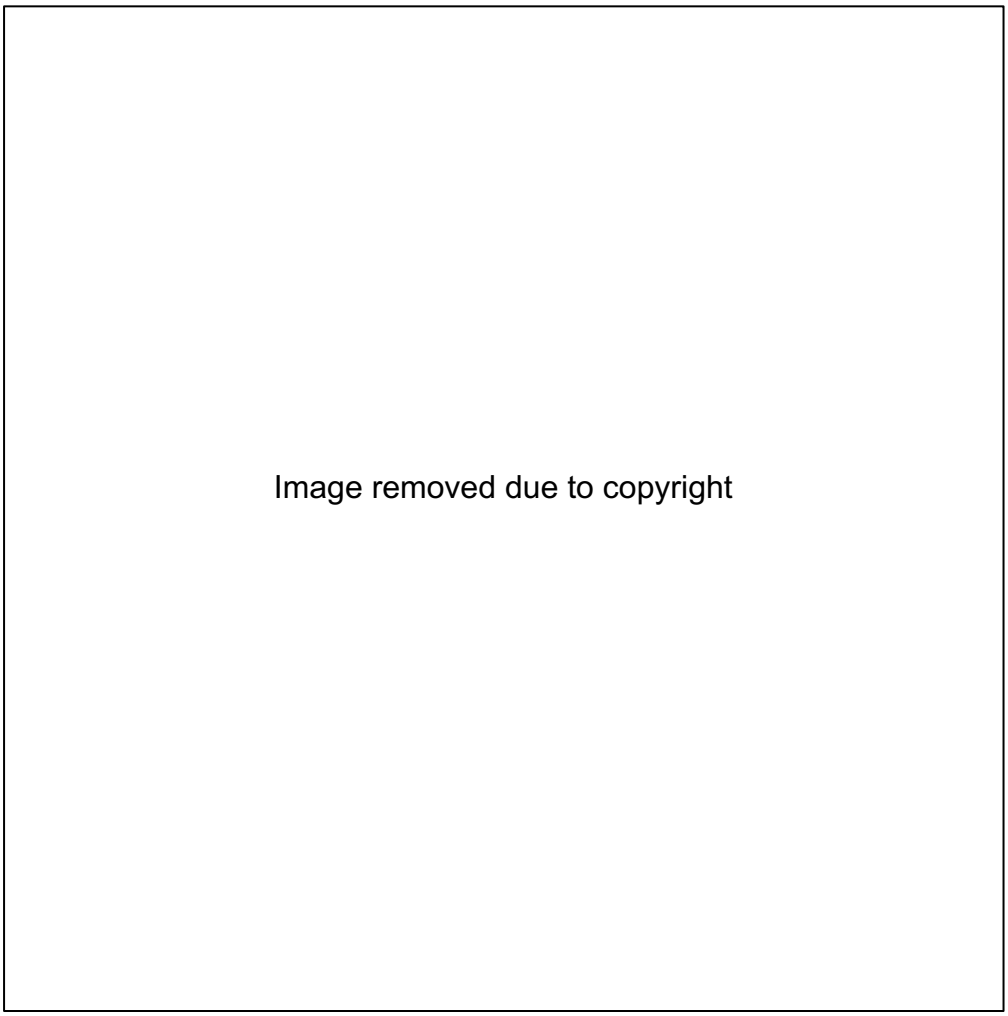

Image 8[95]

[95] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Manuel Gutiérrez Paredes (1965-1970 (predominan1967-1969))" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/mgp3078). This image is also included as the cover for *Proceso*'s issue 1310 cited above.

Images 7 and 8 are framed in *Proceso* magazine's number 1310, published in 2001, as hidden images from a photographer for the government.[96] However, even if these images were not published in newspapers at the time and were only revealed and published decades later, they were nevertheless created and therefore exist, even if as ashes, as Didi-Huberman states, or as traces that can be invested with the agency of other traces. Whilst the image demands a gaze, and its subjective effects can be fathomed only from the encounter with it, could it not be presumed that capturing an image, however elusively or minimally, implies a mark in visuality and holds the possibility of its return within it? For Judith Butler, the photograph not only follows the event but becomes integral to its occurrence and its reality.[97] Referring to Abu Ghraib's photographs, Butler says:

> Perhaps the camera promises a festive cruelty: "Oh, good, the camera's here: let's begin the torture so that the photograph can capture and commemorate our act!" If so, the photograph is already at work prompting, framing, and orchestrating the act, even as it captures the act at the moment of its accomplishment.[98]

Following Butler's idea, even if the previous images were not shown in the media, they framed the event. Not only do they do so for posterity or in the future, but they frame the event itself by being looked at from the camera's perspective. That these images exist does not make the event more real, for events without images are no less real than those with a visual document to accompany them. Here, we must understand the visual production of the event as a mark, not of its realness nor its actual occurrence, but as a tentative of signifying something already set in motion but for which we have no words.

The camera "promising a festive cruelty", as Butler puts it, allows understanding not only this event and these images but all those to come in the following chapters. It is not that the event was orchestrated for the camera, but that the camera inflects something of its own vision into the composition of what it is framing—and so, subjectivities can come into a sharper profile. The smiling soldier recognises the camera as he looks directly at it. In a sense, whether the smile is an action reflex for the camera, his smile is inextricably linked to the humiliation he inflicted on the young man. He welcomes the camera as a witness and co-conspirator in Butler's sense.

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[96] The images included in this number were later recognised as those of government photographer Manuel Gutiérrez Paredes and were also part of UNAM's Historical Archive. Oralia García Cárdenas, "El 68 desde otra óptica. La Colección Manuel Gutiérrez Paredes", in *Alquimia*, no. 42, p. 54.
[97] Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life grievable?*, London, Verso, 2009, p. 83.
[98] *Loc. Cit.*

These images are the developing forms of the rhetoric of violence in the country that perdures to this day, patently so, the persecution of students and teachers. Many of the events in the Dirty War can be seen as precursors of major events in the last decade. One of the ways in which the enemy was constructed and framed, as seen from Madera to 2 October 1968, is in the subjective production of the young, violent, communist, and, thus, *annihilateable* other. These images illustrate how the process of humiliating them before the camera adjudicates violence to them, the photographed subjects, and enables the power's discourses based on these humiliations.

Image 6 attests to this humiliation whereby it is legible in the image alone—roughly handling a young man and in what we know happened: they cut his long hair in an act of humiliation, signalling undesirable qualities and conducts. Photographing young men facing the wall, in a vulnerable position, in their underwear, with their backs open to the firearms of the soldiers, or, conversely, a full-frontal image of one of those students in a dazed state, from the look on his face, who someone, it appears from the position of his clothes, stripped him of them.

Predominantly in images 7 and 8, whether by official instructions, as the *Proceso* title suggests, or by the sense of his own system of representation, the cameraperson introduces other violences to the scene. In the [already] violent events, there is an instant of decision where someone *frames, clicks, and records* what is or will become a scene. It fragments the instant of pain and humiliation and signs the violence with another, that of being subjected to other gazes, other discourses, the violences of repetition.

Even if we can question whether humiliating the students who had become a thorn in Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidency and could have been, at the same time, humiliated by the extent and visibility of the students' protest was the ultimate intention of the photographer, the soldiers and camera were there to do it. These images are the precursors of more extreme forms of violence and their visualisation. Violence and cruelty, by the humiliated positions signified in them, become key emblems in many of these images. On the other hand, the images included below show the other side of the disproportionate exertion of power over the social subject deemed uncomfortable.

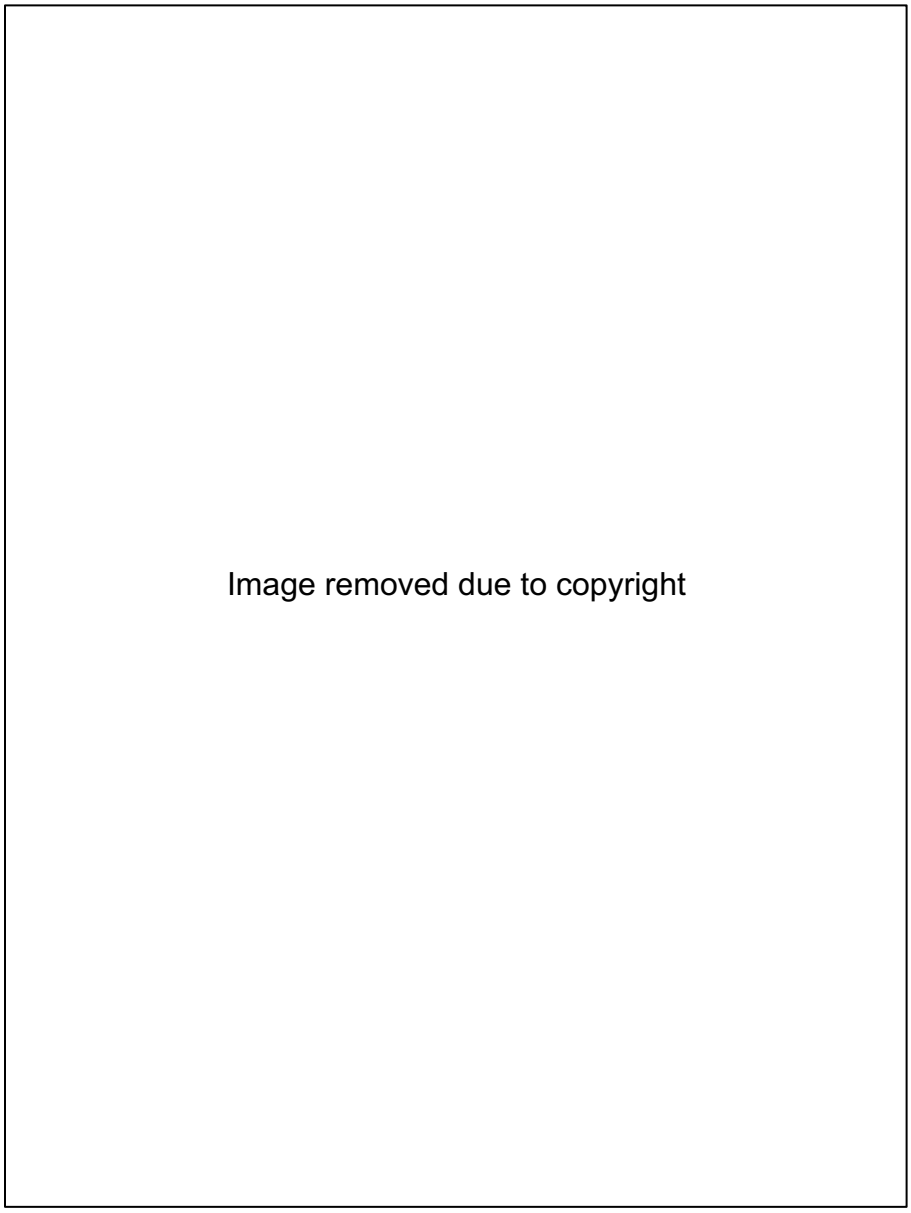

Image 9[99]

[99] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-2943).

As mentioned previously, *Por qué?* magazine was one of the few media that reported the events of 2 October 1968 and the Dirty War. According to Escobedo Aguirre, the magazine, directed by journalist Mario Renato Menéndez Rodríguez, positioned itself as the "bearer of the truth". The point, argues Escobedo Aguirre, "was to reveal that which was hidden in other news media: a gaze not from the power's perspective but from its counterpart".[100] Thus, throughout its operation from 1968 to 1974, this magazine would include the narration and images of events embedded in the Mexican Dirty War.

Menéndez Rodríguez was eventually exiled to Cuba following the orders of President Luis Echeverría Álvarez—who was home secretary during the massacre of 2 October 1968. Menéndez Rodríguez's type of journalism, according to Raúl Bazán, was the only one that showed images of the student repression that no other media did and thus became uncomfortable for the regime.[101] At the time of authoritarian politics, including the repression of freedom of speech by the PRI governments, first by Díaz Ordaz and followed by Echeverría, the presence of media like *Por qué?* presented a gaze into the silence and tainted visibility of the executions, tortures, illegal detentions, and forced disappearances all over the country.[102]

Bazán explains that Menéndez's relationships with other journalists allowed him to obtain photographic testimonies of the cruellest repressions against the students. The other journalists were not allowed to publish their photographs in their respective newspapers because of the media's fear of the government's reaction.[103] Image 9 can be found in box 37 of the press excerpts from the 1968 student movement by the Historical Archive of UNAM, initially published by *Por qué?* in a special issue in November 1968; image 10, below, was placed on the cover.

[100] Escobedo Aguirre, *Op. Cit.,* p. 24.
[101] Raúl Bazán, "Un recorrido por la prensa política del siglo XX en México", in *Boletín de la Biblioteca Nacional de México,* no. 8, p. 35.
[102] *Loc. Cit.*
[103] *Loc. Cit.*

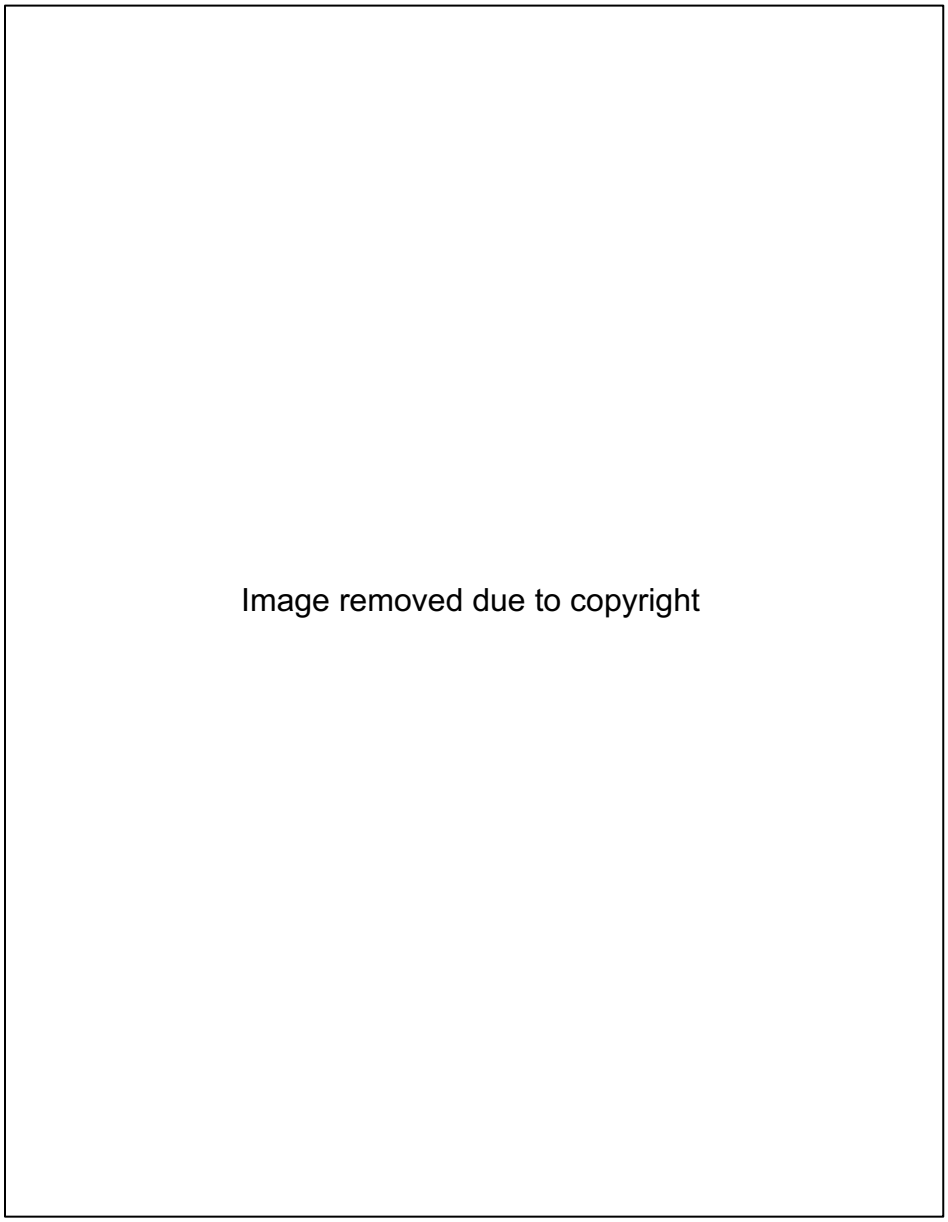

Image 10[104]

Images 9, 10, 11, and 12 included in the *Por qué?* special issue show the bodies of people killed on the afternoon of 2 October 1968. All these images are chilling, but there is something in the faces of the youths in images 10 and 11 that is significantly striking. If the images are shocking today, with their habitual encounter, then they could presumably have

[104] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-2942).

been even more shocking back then. In these images, we can witness the politics of repression and extermination that the Mexican State still carries.

On the page before image 11, Menéndez explains that a young student woman was one of the first victims. It is unclear whether the young student is the one shown in this image because the images, in this instance, are not accompanied by the victims' names. On the contrary, underneath the image, the text "…that is why they had to be assassinated…" can be read; in Spanish, "…por eso había que asesinarlas…", where the verb "asesinar", murder, is written in the feminine gender.

The footnote, knowing that *Por qué?* was critical of the government and regularly used sensational language and expressions to make their point, suggests a fragmented yet metonymic thought or discourse on behalf of the government. As if this was what they, the government, thought, and the image proves it. The phrase, however, seems ambivalent and is expected to signify something on its own. In the same manner as Madera's images, yet this time on the side of the text, there is a complexity with text and image—both together and on their own—whose understanding cannot be easily left to common sense or empty rhetoric; they form a discursive structure whose traces we must unravel to make sense of.

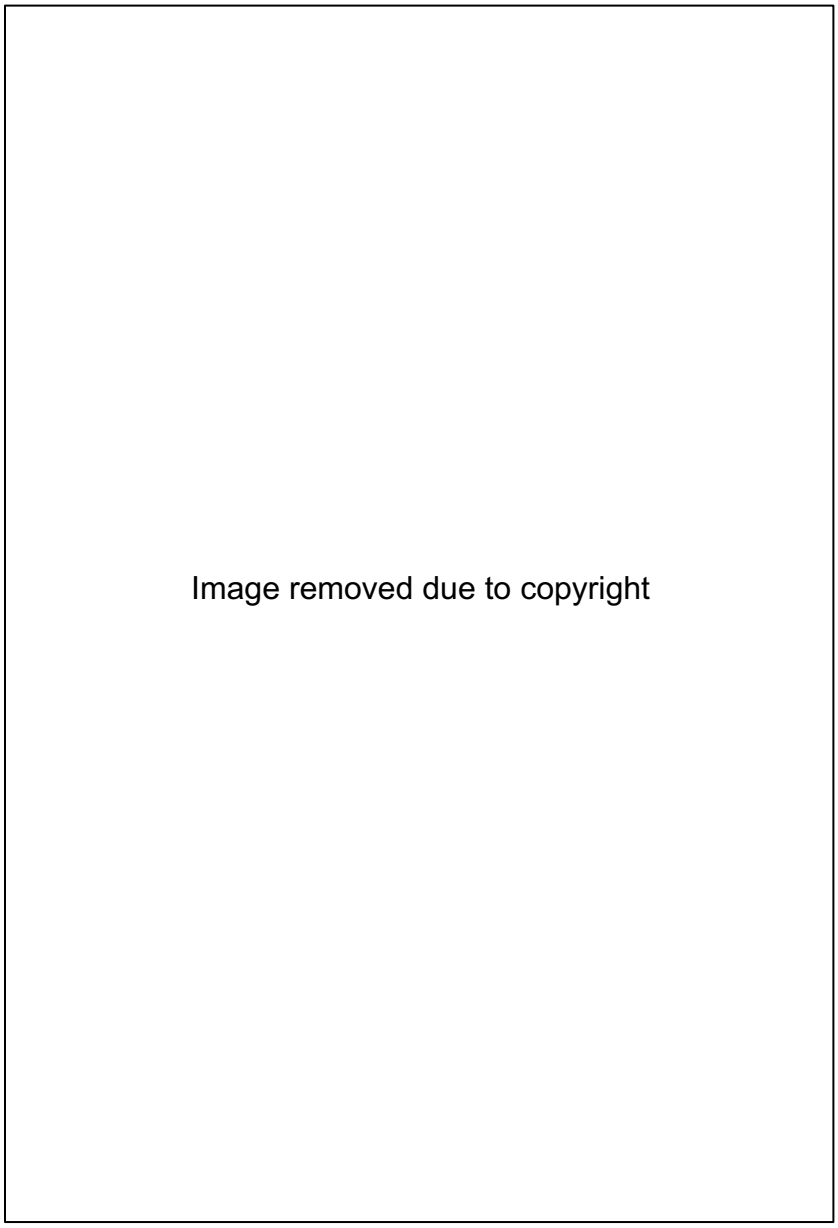

Image 11[105]

Image 11 is haunting. This young student, with eyes partly opened, we do not know if dead or dying, is almost looking at the viewer. The footnote introduces another kind of alarm into question. If we did not know that *Por qué?* strongly criticised the repression, what would we think this legend at the bottom means? This is not to suggest that this page could

[105] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-2953).

or should be examined outside the context of that particular magazine but that it must be recontextualised from within. In that line, Juan Carlos Sánchez Sierra suggests that *Por qué?*'s type of journalism embodied a moralistic, often paternalistic and condescending, discourse—even when situated on the political left and opposed to the government.[106] It was a type of journalism, according to Sánchez Sierra, that walked the fine line between political denunciation and sensationalist alarmism.[107] The central issue, he argues, was that:

> The dialogue [this] journalism pretended to establish with its reader was instead a monologue and was crossed by perceptions that placed women and young people at a disadvantage when exercising political and civil rights, even at the time of establishing themselves as an opposition besides a highly fragmented left. Every discourse elaborated as a bridge with the youth was marked by a moralistic tone, condescension, and paternalism, even though the consulted issues showed a liberal position, respectful of women and admirers of the youth.[108]

Additionally, he describes this type of journalism as heroic leftist journalism that began defining docile subjectivities from a political perspective and ideologically assimilable to the time's spirit.[109] The idea that Menéndez walked a fine line between political denunciation and sensationalist alarmism can lead to questioning the firmness of the lines that divide showing and hiding images and words. It further serves to question the productions of visibility and invisibility. As Butler states regarding the use of the camera and the instrumentalisation of Abu Ghraib's images, we must bear in mind the images' subsequent use in different directions from initial intentions.

> The photos have clearly traveled outside the original scene, left the hands of the photographer, or turned against the photographer him or herself, even perhaps vanquished his or her pleasure. It gave rise to a different gaze than the one that would ask for a repetition of the scene, and so we probably need to accept that the photograph neither tortures nor redeems, but can be instrumentalized in radically different directions, depending on how it is discursively framed and through what form of media presentation it is displayed.[110]

In an image related to image 11 and the argument over the use of images, writer Azahua argues that most people in our contemporary world would prefer not to be

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[106] Juan Carlos Sánchez Sierra, "Periodismo heroico, moral y virilidad revolucionaria: la juventud y la mujer en la revista Por Qué?, 1968-1974", in *Secuencia,* no. 94, p. 240.
[107] *Ibid.,* p. 241.
[108] *Ibid.,* p. 268.
[109] *Ibid.,* p. 255.
[110] Butler, Frames of war, *Op. Cit.,* p. 92.

photographed. Particularly, she says, if their demise resulted from a violent event. “We instinctively perceive the photographic act, in the context of death, as the invasion of an instant when the portrayed cannot defend oneself, cannot say yes or no”.[111] However, for Azahua, this becomes a problem when weighing the respect towards the image of the dead and their use in a revindication of justice; this is the case of Ana María Regina Teuscher Kruger’s image (image 12).[112]

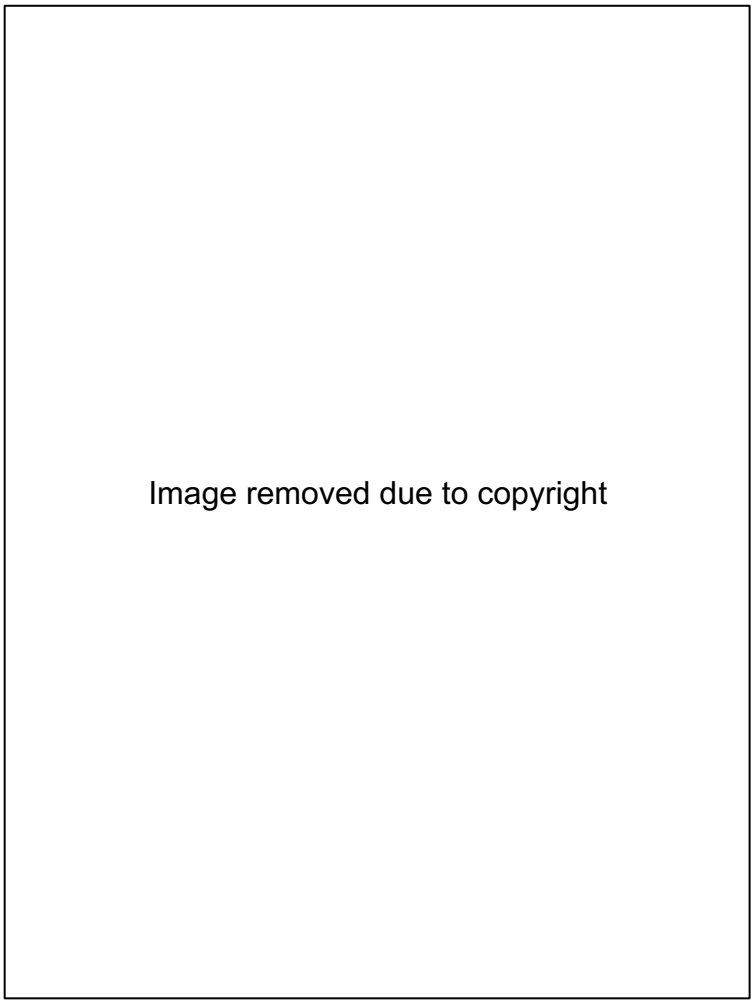

Image 12[113]

[111] Marina Azahua, *Retrato involuntario. El acto fotográfico como forma de violencia,* Mexico City, Tusquets Editores, 2014, p. 174.
[112] *Loc. Cit.*
[113] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, “Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)” (FROM, 22 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-3608).

Teuscher Kruger's death was the first officially recognised one of the massacre of 2 October 1968. Her name, death, and image were published in newspapers first following this event. However, according to Azahua, in the following decades, Teuscher Kruger's image fell into a sort of secrecy that enabled its forgetting. For Azahua, the loss of the image introduces the question of the loss of memory: "when we lose a photograph, many times we lose the recollection; when a photograph is stolen from us, are they stealing our memory?".[114] Azahua's question is inviting—particularly seeing the images of these two young women—to think of the traces that, even when pushed out of the collective memory, continue to exist and perdure, thus evidenced in their reappearance in a different time, in a different context.

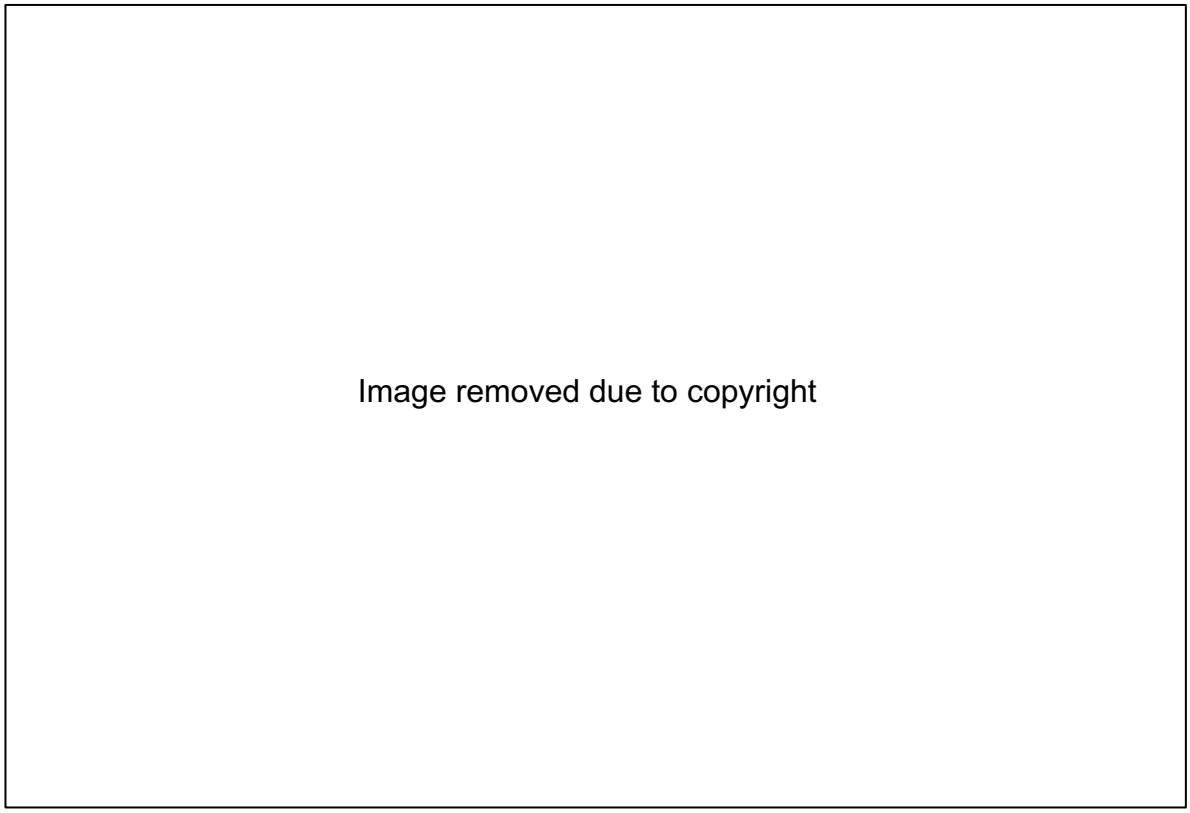

Image 13[115]

[114] Azahua, *Op. Cit.,* p. 175.
[115] Image can be found in: Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, "Hemerografía sobre el movimiento estudiantil de 1968 (1944-1971)" (FROM, 20 February, 2023: http://www.ahunam.unam.mx:8081/index.php/hm68-2976).

However, the question remains if *Por qué?* or *Siempre's* journalism, where Teuscher Kruger's image was likewise reproduced, was necessary as it was presented, with raw images and a moralistic tone included. What was it that images 10 and 11 could say that exceeded these young people's right not to have their broken bodies shown without even their names present? The journalistic decisions are, without a doubt, difficult ones to make. It might be true that Menéndez embodied the ideal of revolutionary journalism that needed to show everything the government did and, by doing so, birth a more considerable opposition to the regime. It might also be true that these images, once in existence, find their ethos in being seen because they had already made a mark in the fabric of the scene and had, in Butler's way, been participants in the reality of the event.

These questions must be asked even when destined to trail into an abyss of futile formulations. Because, even if done with righteous—first, defining what these are—political intentions, the production and reproduction of these images carry significant responsibilities with them. Not only over the institutional use that these images could subsequently be employed for, nor, even if crucial, only for the subjective and social implications of viewing them, but because they too are subjected to a discourse—even if one of political liberation, equality, and social struggle—, where the subjects depicted in them become homogenised emblems.

Two leaders

As mentioned previously, a common trait of the images of the time, specifically in the context of the Dirty War, was to reproduce the faces of the dead—in their death. Many images—such as images 3, 9, 10, 11, and 12—show the bloodied faces of the dead, with a greater focus on their faces than their bodies, as if death was seen more clearly here than in their bodies. This fact is particularly notorious in retrospect when noticing that contemporary images of violence in the country and the ways of giving death focus on conveying the constriction of the flesh for the horrors that can be inflicted on bodies.

It is not that the face is not a predominant feature today, but it has shifted in how it is materially and visually represented. Whereas the images of the period studied in this chapter show primarily complete, but notably dead, faces—the faces that can no longer see me seeing them—the contemporary techniques of ensuring that rotund desecration of the face

today are more muddled. With images of decapitations, the heads are sometimes not found in the same scene or images. On many occasions, for instance, in images of hanged bodies, the bodies are partially or totally naked, yet the head is covered with a plastic bag. In images of executed bodies—coup de grace—the bodies are lying face down. At times, however, the heads of decapitated bodies are placed front and centre on top of common-use objects, conveying another uncanny characteristic.

David Le Breton states that, in occidental cultures, the body is the first border. The separation that physically distinguishes one body from another, the enclosure of a single body, is the place of individuation and establishes the person's contours. "For better or worse, the individual is their body, not another thing".[116] However, Le Breton continues, the gaze of the others is another limit: "the first violence is the gaze of the others".[117]

This is present in Emmanuel Levinas and Derrida's thoughts on the face and violence. Le Breton's conception of the gaze of the other as violence, as a bordering of myself, comes from the face as "an encounter with the Other *as* other", as Chloé Taylor sustains.[118] Faces, Taylor argues, "strike and evade us, frustrate us with their secrets, are unthematizably complex, inaccessible beneath our gaze".[119] Taylor continues to state that the face, singularising the face, has the ability to arrest, haunt, or move us "to ethical action, pity, compassion, forgiveness, aid, and love".[120]

Taylor questions Levinas' imposition of knowledge in seeing, that "we never see without knowing, never look in wonder" and, in doing so, Levinas dismissed vision as an imposition of knowledge on the other.[121] Meanwhile, he accepted language as evading such inflictions by always permitting response and no pre-possessing knowledge:

> In fact, both vision and discourse function in some cases as impositions of knowledge, power, and sameness on the other, but both may function otherwise, as when the other's speech or silence is heard and responded to, or when the sight absorbs, surprises, awes and bewilders the seeing subject, rather than simply absorbing what she sees and hears.[122]

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[116] David Le Breton, *El cuerpo herido: identidades estalladas contemporáneas,* Buenos Aires, Topía Editorial, 2017, p. 21.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[118] Chloé Taylor, "Hard, Dry Eyes and Eyes That Weep: Vision and Ethics in Levinas and Derrida", in *Postmodern Culture,* Johns Hopkins University Press, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 6.
[119] *Loc. Cit.*
[120] *Loc. Cit.*
[121] *Ibid.,* p. 7.
[122] *Ibid.,* p. 8.

In one way or another, either by enabling or impeding them, the face and silence are at the core of these worst violences. The face provokes violence but also arrests it. Silence and absence constitute violence as much as noise and blood. The worst violences lurk before our eyes without being seen nor consciously thought of. Derrida's thoughts invite us to think of our vision and our violences. Principally how we can reflect on our vision and our silence to disarticulate the discourses that deny those violences to give place to justice.[123]

How, then, should we think of the following images through this conception of the face—their portrayed faces when dead—and silence—recognising that the Dirty War was, and continues to be, veiled in silence and secrecy, except for the events that were visually exploited such as Lucio Cabañas' image? These questions will be developed more in the final chapter, yet they merit an introduction here to read and see through the following chapters, bearing them in mind. Again, the question as to why *Por qué?* reproduced images 14 and 15, or why did so many media outlets include the close-up of Lucio Cabañas' face, images 16 and 17, when captured and shot, can easily be attributed to the display and exercise of the State's power against insurrectionists and indigenous leaders—a major fear in Mexico, as the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN in Spanish) has shown. However, what they mean for subsequent subjective and social configurations can bear another significance towards the politics of remembrance and justice.

[123] Miriam Jerade, *Violencia. Una lectura desde la deconstrucción de Jacques Derrida,* Santiago de Chile, ediciones / metales pesados, 2018, n.p. (Kindle edition).

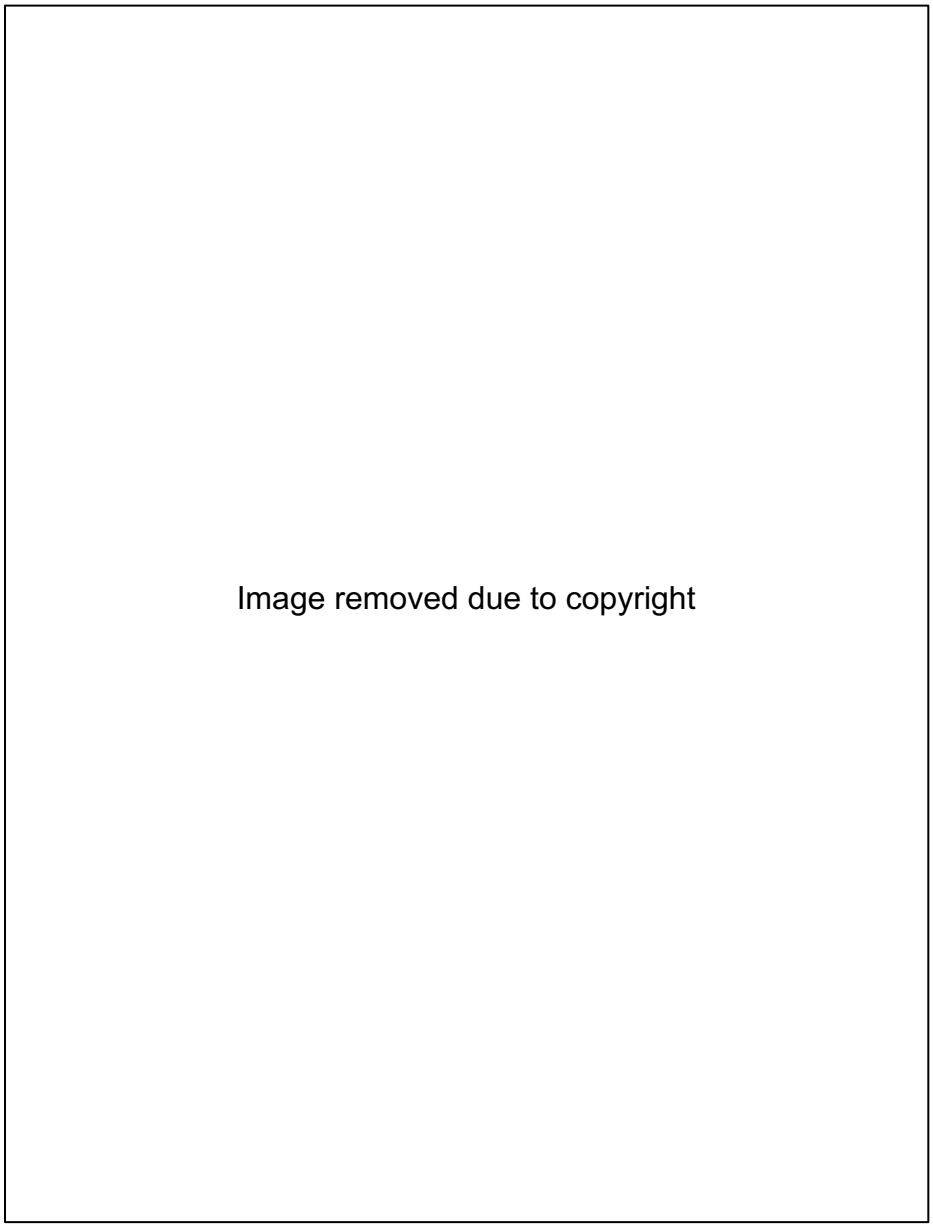

Image 14[124]

Historically, the state of Guerrero has been one of Mexico's poorest and most marginalised states. Conversely, until the war on drugs, Acapulco was one of the most famous tourist destinations. In the 1960s, Guerrero had a 62.1 % illiteracy rate, was one of the most exploited states for its natural resources, and was one of the most visited ports in Mexico. The municipality that suffered the most during the Dirty War was Atoyac de Álvarez,

[124] Image can be found in: The cover of *Por qué? Revista independiente,* no. 190, 1972.

emblematic for its guerrilla activity of two teachers of "peasant origin, charismatic, and jealous of their leaderships, leaders of repressed political struggles, and witnesses of unpunished massacres: Genaro Vázquez Rojas and Lucio Cabañas Barrientos".[125]

Vázquez Rojas co-founded the Guerrerense Civic Association (Asociación Cívica Guerrerense, ACG, in Spanish), in 1959. The ACG's objective was to facilitate cultural and political activities and serve as a forum against the abuses committed by chieftains and the governor. In 1960, the ACG had already brought together 33 discontent organisations to demand an investigation into the myriad of abuses the peasants had suffered.[126] One of the signees was Lucio Cabañas Barrientos, on behalf of the normal school of Ayotzinapa.[127]

Following years of repression, persecution, and even jail, Vázquez Rojas' struggle took to arms, and the ACG's strategy veered towards a military component in 1968. Vázquez Rojas died on 2 February 1972. According to government reports, he died in a car accident, travelling at 140 km/h. This fact was distrusted by many, mainly due to the intense persecution he was subjected to and the repression against the ACG and its members.

Image 14 presents the cover of *Por qué? which* shows the body of Vázquez Rojas in what seems to be the morgue with a chest incision. Already in exile in Cuba, Menéndez Rodríguez—director of the magazine—wrote a brief memorial in this issue. He blames the government and the "left" opportunists for giving death to one of the greatest combatants in Mexico. Menéndez's language is flowery and distracting, embellishing Vázquez's Rojas life and death with adjectives that, when reading through, make a critique of the martyrisation of the *guerrillero's* life by an "opportunistic" left whilst turning Vázquez into a symbol of the perdurance of the revolution.[128]

The translation of the text in image 15 reads, "The face clean, without any trace of the brutal encounter against the vehicle's windshield that, according to the police, ran at 140 km per hour. How, truly, did the exemplar guerrillero die?".[129] This question, and the mention of the lack of any trace of a car crash on his face, alludes to the extra-official versions that

[125] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 103-104.
[126] *Ibid.,* p. 106.
[127] The normal school of Ayotzinapa was, even then, a very politicised space.
[128] What Menéndez Rodríguez calls the opportunistic left might refer to the political parties that recalled his revolutionary merits when Vázquez Rojas died but questioned his methods. A spokesperson of the Popular Socialist Party "deplored his death, but considered that his tactics were not advisable at the moment the country is living". El Porvenir, "PPS Contra la Violencia y Deplora la Muerte de Genaro", 4 February, 1972, p. 5-A.
[129] *Por qué? Revista independiente,* no. 190, 1972, p. 33.

claimed that he died in a military hospital in Morelia at the hands of the military.[130] Vázquez Rojas' burial received great public adulation, according to Alexander Aviña, "and the public anger directed at the soldiers present".[131] However, newspaper El Universal reported his death—and misspelt his name—as "the end of a life deviated by resentment", showing a mugshot of him from when he was arrested.[132]

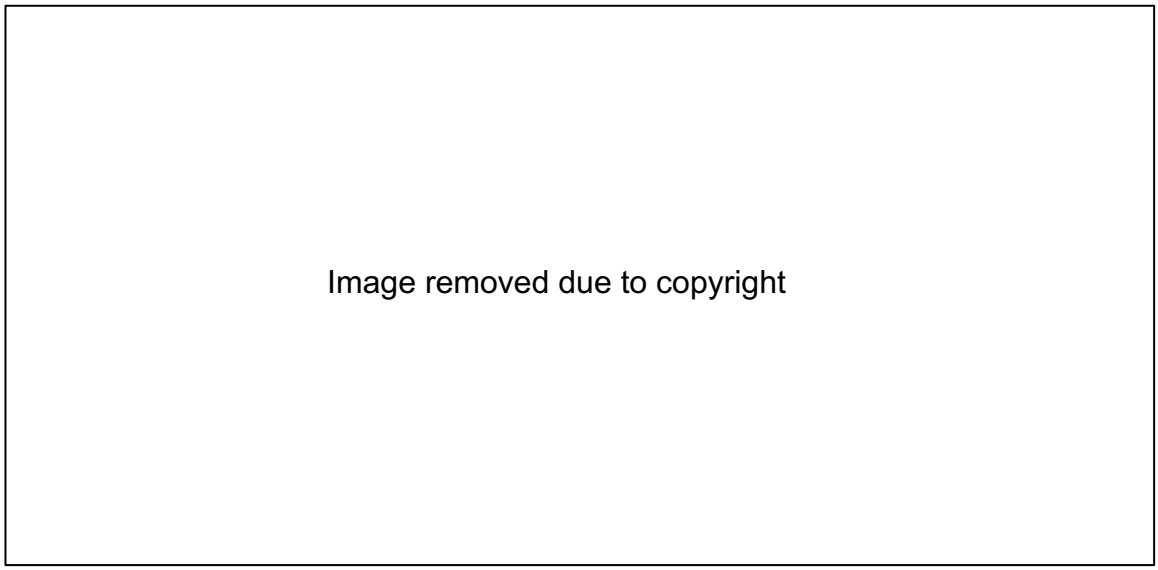

Image 15[133]

Like the questionable visibility mentioned thus far, silence stands out as a form of repression in the 1960s and 1970s. However, at the same time as biased or blatantly false information circulated through the major media outlets in the country, the foundations for a discursivity based on the fear of the other—with a deep racist and colonialist perspective, which will be addressed in chapter four—lurked underneath. The typical images were of

[130] CNDH, "Muerte de Genaro Vázquez Rojas Maestro, líder sindical del magisterio guerrerense, defensor de las causas campesinas, guerrillero" (FROM, 10 May, 2023: https://www.cndh.org.mx/noticia/muerte-de-genaro-vazquez-rojas-maestro-lider-sindical-del-magisterio-guerrerense-defensor).
[131] "Memorably one elderly woman verbally abused the soldiers, cursed them, and questioned their manhood". Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution. Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1.
[132] El Universal, "Se Mató Jenaro Vázquez", 3 February, 1972, 1st section, p. 1. On page 12, the article included an image of the wrecked car in which Genaro Vázquez was driving.
[133] Image can be found in: *Por qué? Revista independiente,* no. 190, 1972, p. 33.

Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas alive, holding weapons, in the mountains of Guerrero. The words and images used to describe them and their struggles can be seen, particularly in retrospect, aimed at instilling the fear of indigenous communities taking their lives into their own hands, always at the mercy of the 'mestizo' or ruling classes.[134]

Throughout the urban conflicts in different cities in Mexico, the signifiers were also applied to the youth. Nevertheless, the link between students at the National University—as well as many other preparatory schools and universities in Mexico—and teachers, such as the normal rural teachers[135] in Guerrero or Chihuahua, for instance, is outstanding. So, even if *Por qué?* showed the images of their dead bodies, used them as a symbol, or used embellished language to talk about their lives, they *are* traces of a period in Mexico, of the lives of revolutionary leaders who were severely repressed by the state and fought for the recognition of the poverty, violence, torture, and forced disappearances of their people. Furthermore, the images existed and were perhaps shown in newspapers or magazines that, due to time and location limits, were not covered by the archival documentation conducted for this research.

Lucio Cabañas Barrientos did not initially think Mexico had the conditions for a guerrilla movement and did not consider the armed struggle a route for the changes the country needed. Later, following many repressions in Guerrero, Cabañas decided to create a guerrilla that would later become an army of the people. At first, the strategy of the Party of the Poor (Partido de los Pobres, PDLP, in Spanish) was to summon people to the party and subsequently create the armed wing, the Peasant Brigade of Ajusticiamiento (Brigada Campesina de Ajusticiamiento, BCA, in Spanish).[136]

> When PDLP leader Cabañas spoke in 1973–4 of the "people's patient endurance of bad government, mistreatment by government officials [but not] of massacres," he essentially referred to an existing moral economy of vengeance that violently called for justice and the recovery of communal dignity. (Indeed, the very name of the PDLP's military wing, the Peasant Brigade of Ajusticiamiento, refers to the double meaning of "bringing to justice" and "execution" in relation to perceived class enemies.) The task of the ACNR and PDLP was to translate such demands for local vengeance into a broader emancipatory project that directed revolutionary violence against what the ACNR termed the PRI "pro-imperialist oligarchy." In this struggle, as ex-PDLP

[134] The phantasy of the mestizaje in Mexico has always been the basis for all indigenous groups' oppression, marginalisation, and oblivion.
[135] Part of the *escuelas normales* but located in rural areas of Mexico.
[136] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 120.

guerrilla Luis León Mendiola recalled, peasant communities faced a seemingly clear choice: “Are you with the rich or with the Party of the Poor?”[137]

On the morning of 2 December 1974, Lucio Cabañas was killed. According to Castellanos, there are three versions of the last moments of the *guerrillero*. The first official one is that two soldiers shot him in the jaw and torso. The second one says the opposite, claiming that he was first shot at from the back before giving him the coup de grace. The third one states that Cabañas killed himself. As further noted by Castellanos, 1974, the year of Cabañas’ death, was also the year with the most forced disappearances in the country, most of them in the mountains of Atoyac, where Cabañas was killed.[138]

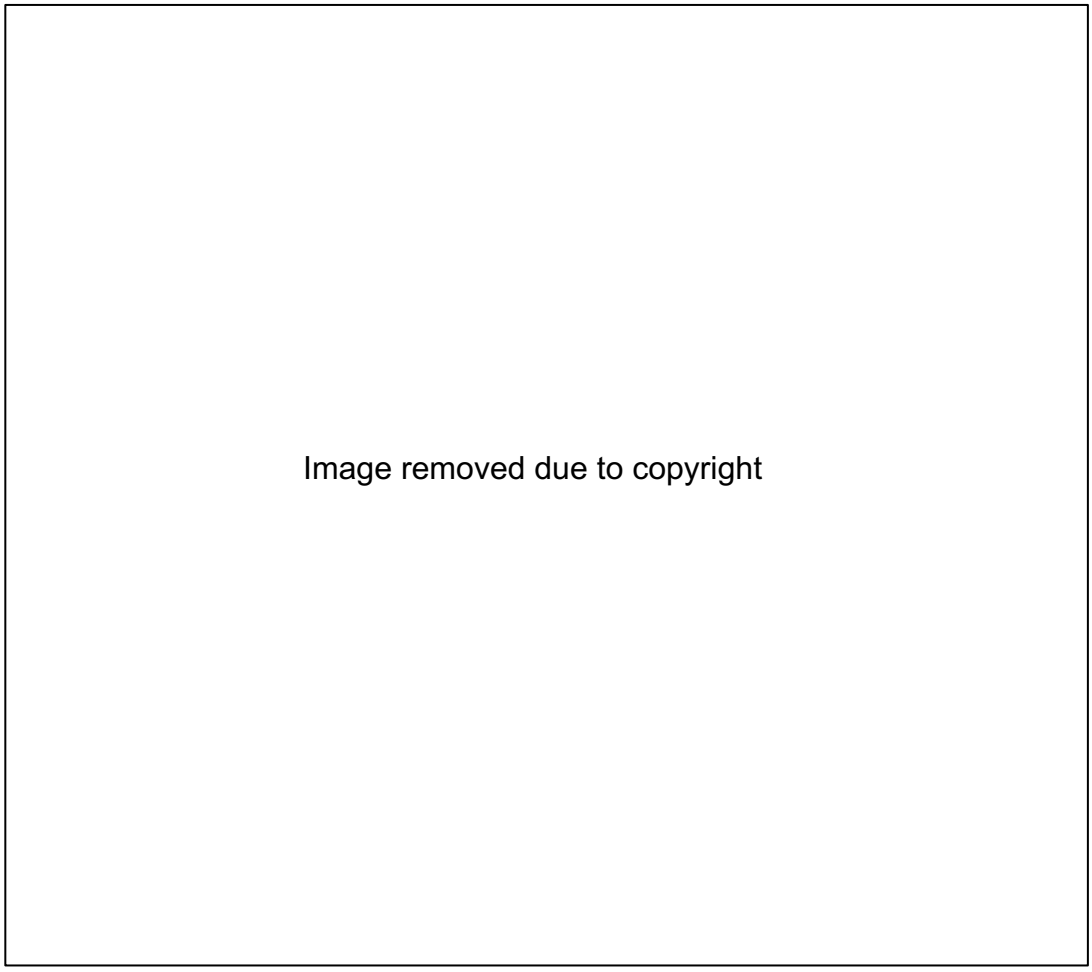

Image 16[139]

[137] Aviña, *Op. Cit.,* p. 8.
[138] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 159-160.
[139] Image can be found in: El Universal, 3 December, 1974, 1st section, p. 1.

Image 16 shows the living and dead face of Lucio Cabañas side by side. The text reads, “Lucio Cabañas in the time when he provided his services as a schoolteacher and as he was left soon after his death, in photos distributed by the Ministry for National Defence”.[140] This image is emblematic, showing Cabañas’ face, up close, both full of life and “as he was left” after his death. More startling is the decision to include this image in the newspaper. It is not gruesome in the same manner as some images from the previous conflicts, it is not horrifying as today’s are, and yet it has an eeriness that seems as if debating life and death in that border, that strip, in-between both images to form one.

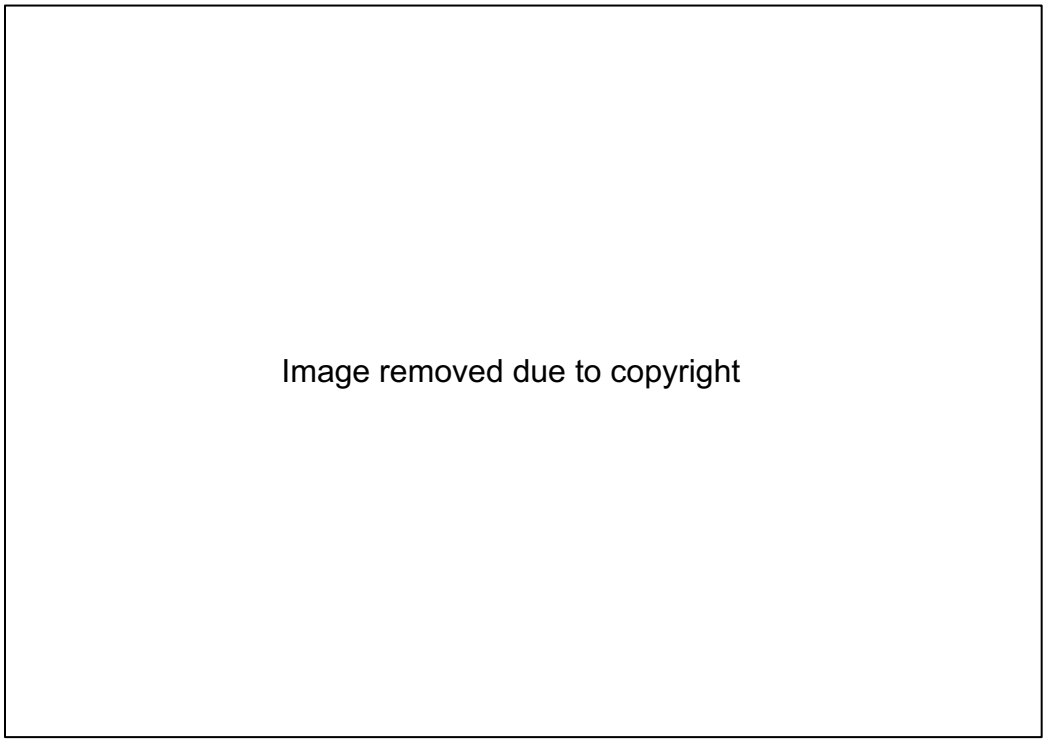

Image 17[141]

[140] *Loc. Cit.*
[141] Image can be found in: Desinformémonos, “A 41 años del asesinato de Lucio Cabañas” (FROM, 11 May, 2023: https://desinformemonos.org/a-41-anos-del-asesinato-de-lucio-cabanas/). The image in question is the one on the right.

This image of Cabañas' body, surrounded by triumphant soldiers, was not one of the images shown at the time.[142] However, it is significant: the poses, the almost smiling faces of some, as if posing with their prey. It is reminiscent of the soldiers holding the young man the night of the 2 October 1968 massacre and, even more, of the display of Che Guevara's body, likewise surrounded by soldiers and reporters. This can continue the previous argument on the person's humiliation even when dead. It implies the defeat and the power to do with their bodies as they wish and choose to show or hide both the crime and the remains.

> Humiliation is inscribed as shame in the body as if showing a naked body removing the social clothing. The subject of nakedness is easily turned into the body of violence. Nevertheless, there is something in the subject that makes him resist, the fact of having been named, included in the space-time of men and their traces that are reinscribed in the course of their history.[143]

[142] To the extent of the research conducted. There is, however, a video showing what appears to be a forensic appreciation of Cabañas' dead body. Given the unverified nature of this video, it is not included as a primary source but as a supporting document. The video can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yGv3Yidedg.

[143] Raúl Gutiérrez Guerrero and Roberto Brito Manero, "La abyección en los umbrales del imaginario", in *Veredas,* extraordinary number, p. 133.

Interlude: hiatus

¿Usted cree que es
normal que en un país
desaparezca la gente?

Do you think it is normal
for people to disappear in
a country?[144]

The last chapter examined images produced in the Mexican Dirty War to understand the broader context of this period and to trace today's visuality to past marks. From a perspective of memory and remembrance, the 1960s and 1970s in Mexico marked politics and discourses that carry on to this day. However, from this same perspective, there is no straight line between events, but rather glimpses, bursts of semblance and recognition that appear through the crevices in a way that can be read today as *something.*

The Dirty War inaugurated many practices of abuse of power, extrajudicial executions, persecution, and forced disappearance that we live with today—from the attacks on Madera and the display of the *guerrilleros* bodies to the criminalisation of students and youth. These practices show contempt over their lives and the visual figuration of them as enemies of the State, the ferocious and disdainful persecution of indigenous movements, relegated, as always in Mexico, to sub-actors that can be eliminated or disappeared in the shadows of our vision, yet consistently humiliated in the media. The Dirty War proves indispensable to think if, and if so, how, our contemporary ways of representing death and the dead are sustained from this past.

The following chapters will unravel Mexico's visuality from 2006 to date. However, around two decades separate this period from the one discussed before. Two decades that, whilst unable to explore here in full due to the limited pertinence to the dissertation, nevertheless bear significant weight in Mexico's history and memory. Equally, they have contributed to the visualisation of violence in the country, how certain bodies are depicted, and how images are produced and reproduced within the country. Thus, this section is intended to underline some essential points of these two decades briefly.

[144] This question was posed to a reporter covering a womens' hunger strike in 1978. In Vicente Ovalle, *Op. Cit.,* p. 21.

After the sole presidential candidate, José López Portillo, was elected as president, ex-president Echeverría orchestrated an internal *coup* against one of the most critical newspapers and journalists against his government, *Excélsior,* directed by Julio Scherer. According to Castellanos, this moment is harnessed by the Liga to liberate its over 70 women and men held in the Campo Militar Número Uno under charges of participating in subversive groups.[145] López Portillo inherited a country in political and economic crisis and at the same time, 1977 was one of the bloodiest years in the history of the Mexican urban guerrilla.[146]

Following several attacks and counterattacks during 1977 and the first half of 1978, in the summer of 1978, a general Law of Amnesty was expected for the following annual presidential report. In the wake of the presidential address, there was an apparent calm, Castellanos narrates: the Liga was no longer in the scene; the deeply hurt *Unión del Pueblo* did not detonate any more bombs; there was no news from the FRAP in Jalisco, or the FLN in the Lacandon jungle.[147] Meanwhile, Amnesty International was broadcasting the rising figures of the war: "six hundred political prisoners, three hundred and fifty-seven forced disappearances, fifty-two exiled men and women in Cuba, Italy, and France".[148]

However, a group of mothers, including Rosario Ibarra[149], gathered in the main square of the capital's centre—called *zócalo*[150]—to hold a hunger strike. On 28 August 1978, eighty women—mothers, wives, and daughters of detained-disappeared victims of the counterinsurgency—installed themselves in Mexico City's *zócalo* claiming for the alive reappearance of disappeared men and women.[151] The hunger strike would last until 3 September, two days after the presidential address. They had the support of university, polytechnic, and rural 'normal' students, and other journalists and militants.[152]

> The soldiers surround them day and night, they exercise in the *zócalo* in front of them. Yet these women do not back down. Thus comes the blackmail. Gutiérrez Barrios signals to a pile of papers on top of his desk. "These are your

[145] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 271.
[146] *Ibid.,* p. 275.
[147] *Ibid.,* p. 292.
[148] *Loc. Cit.*
[149] Her son, Jesús Piedra Ibarra, a member of the Liga, was detained, tortured, and, under Nazar Haro's instructions, was transferred to the central offices of the DFS in Mexico City and then disappeared. Jesús's disappearance was the first registered one in Nuevo León. *Ibid.,* pp. 251-252.
[150] The *zócalo* is bordered by the Metropolitan Cathedral, the National Palace, and the city's original town hall.
[151] "Aparición con vida" or "alive reappearance" is a common motto used by the families of victims of forced disappearance, claiming for them to be returned alive. Vicente Ovalle, *Op. Cit.,* p. 21.
[152] Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* p. 293.

> children's files", he assures them. He promises: "if you go, you will know about your dear ones during the presidential report". They do not go.[153]

Following an abduction gone wrong by the Liga, Minister Jesús Reyes Heroles warns the women: either they leave, or they would be evicted.[154] During the address, the president does not mention the forced disappearances. On 28 September, the amnesty law was published. By December of 1979, around a thousand people had received amnesty; most of these—of peasant origin—were not in prison but were under process. It was until 1982 that the prisoners were all released.[155] Amnesty, writes Castellanos, means "without memory" or "forgetting", but this does not happen.[156]

> Suddenly, this generation of amnesty faces its toll. There are broken families, stigmatised; lineages, such as Cabañas', torn; as a result of the torture, they suffer life-long physical and emotional damages.[157]

Jumping to 1994, following a period of militant reorganisations and new alliances, and amid the North American Free Trade Agreement coming into effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared war on the Mexican State. Former member of the National Liberation Forces (*Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional),* Fernando Yáñez, joins the newly formed EZLN alongside Gloria Benavides and Rafael Sebastián Guillén (Subcomandante Marcos) later on in the 1980s.[158] In the context of the violent state politics against the EZLN, in 1997 the killings of Acteal in Chiapas took place. Around sixty paramilitaries killed 45 Tzotzil indigenous men, women, and children who formed part of *Las abejas* (The Bees). *Las abejas* were fighting against neoliberalism and for self-determination.[159]

Jumping again to the year 2000 to the election of PAN candidate Vicente Fox, the hope for recognition and opportunity to examine past events reignited. This hope aligned with other experiences in Latin America, who held judicial processes against the responsible individuals and forged strong movements favouring remembrance and justice. However, in Mexico, nothing changed with the political party alternance. The impunity pacts that had operated before continued, and the mediocre attempts at creating a prosecution—and not

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[153] *Ibid.,* pp. 293-294.
[154] *Ibid.,* p. 294.
[155] Those that were not disappeared. *Ibid.,* p. 305.
[156] *Ibid.,* p. 306.
[157] *Loc. Cit.*
[158] *Ibid.,* p. 311.
[159] CNDH, "Matanza de Acteal, Chiapas" (FROM, 3 March, 2023: https://www.cndh.org.mx/noticia/matanza-de-acteal-chiapas).

a truth commission—for the events of the past achieved nothing of substance in terms of truth and justice.[160] On the contrary, Fox's term in power is remembered by "trying to resolve the Chiapas conflict in fifteen minutes", and "repressing radicalised movements of normal rural institutions and unions, the same as to the town of San Salvador Atenco".[161]

In 2006, President Fox began tentatively building a new airport in *ejidal*[162] lands in Texcoco, state of Mexico. For this, he expropriated lands at meagre prices. The *ejidatarios*[163] defended their land against the intrusion of people and machinery and declared Atenco as a municipality in resistance. Eventually, the state government under Enrique Peña Nieto (who later became president in 2012) took the offensive and sent federal forces to siege the town of San Salvador Atenco "through blood and fire".[164] According to Illades and Santiago:

> The police tactic combined the *performance* (an impressive police mobilization closed every access to the town), the surprise (the attack at sunrise), the always excessive force (home searches, threats, beatings, multitudinous detentions, torture) and the spoils of war (lootings, rape).[165]

All these events and others not depicted here are evidence of the constant repressions and excessive attacks against the Mexican population. They are included here to convey the systematicity of impunity, lack of accountability, and the theatricality—in the performative sense mentioned above and referring to Elsa Blair's text[166]—through which any potential justice is presented. There are some images of the previous events, especially of Atenco, and most of these made it to international news. However, there is an event, or a series of events, rather, that has become emblematic when thinking of Mexican violence between the 1980s and 2000s: the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in the Northern Mexican border with the U.S.

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[160] Nazar Haro, ex-director of the DFS, was detained and sent to prison in February 2004; he was later released to serve his sentence under house arrest in 2004 and was fully exonerated in 2006. In 2000, Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro and Francisco Quirós Hermosillo stood a military trial facing charges of torturing, disappearing and throwing from aeroplanes the bodies of one hundred and forty-four people with connections to guerrilla groups in the state of Guerrero; they were eventually only found responsible for twenty-two of these disappearances, and in 2002 they were found guilty of drug trafficking. Likewise, ex-president Echeverría was charged with genocide over the events of 2 October 1968; he was placed under house arrest and never stepped foot in jail. Castellanos, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 319-321.
[161] *Ibid.,* p. 312.
[162] The ejido is a communal piece of land owned and decided upon collectively.
[163] The members of the ejido.
[164] Illades and Santiago, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 70-71.
[165] *Ibid.,* p. 71.
[166] Elsa Blair, *Violent deaths. The theatricalisation of excess.*

It is not insignificant to place these events on the bridge between the Dirty War and the war against drug trafficking. The prologue to anthropologist Rita Laura Segato's book *The writing on the body of murdered women in Latin America*, begins precisely by arguing that, in Latin America, "after over a decade of popular insurgencies and uprisings, a new map begins to emerge: one of a mode of social conflict connected to forms of exploitation and dispossession that double their stake of subordination in the continent".[167] This new map, the prologue continues, is drawn by land disputes, the *maquila*[168] as a prototype of labour, territorial disputes amongst drug traffickers, disappearance of women to the hands of mafias, and the proliferation of *sicarios* (hitmen).[169]

In 1993, feminicides began being documented in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Currently, there is an estimate of over 2,300 murdered and hundreds of disappeared women.[170] The narrative that has predominated nationally and internationally—as this has been of the most exceptional cases of violence in Mexican territory abroad—is that one or more psychopaths violently and systematically persecuted and murdered young women based on their gender, social class, age, job, and ethnicity.[171] There are several critiques that have been made to this generalisation, and even to the categories by which victims are defined.

Whilst the crimes in Ciudad Juárez put on the table the concept of feminicide, which, at the same time, claimed a gender perspective, this was insufficient to cover the whole spectrum of the problem. One of these problems is employing the terms indifferently, thus affecting the strategies to conduct searches, administer justice, or understand the whole dimension of the problem. According to Laksmi Adyani de Mora Martínez, with the

[167] Rita Laura Segato, *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez. Territorio, soberanía y crímenes de segundo estado*, Buenos Aires, Tinta Limón, 2013, p. 5.
[168] The *maquiladoras* are industrial plants that "import raw materials, components, and machinery to be processed and assembled in Mexico, and then re-exported predominantly to the U.S. only paying tax over the aggregated value". Óscar F. Contreras and Luis Felipe Munguía, "Evolución de las maquiladoras en México. Política industrial y aprendizaje tecnológico", in *Región y sociedad,* vol. 10, p. 72.
[169] Segato, La escritura en el cuerpo…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 5.
[170] Beatriz Guillén, "Juárez, feminicida en serie" (FROM, 5 March, 2023: https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-01-30/juarez-feminicida-en-serie.html).
[171] Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, "La cultura del feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez, 1993-1999", in *Frontera Norte,* vol. 12, no. 23, p. 88.

interchangeable and incorrect use of the terms “disappeared” in the feminine gender in Spanish *desaparecida*[172], and feminicide[173] more than one problem arises:

> The constant enunciation of this last one [feminicide] causes the disappeared [desaparecida] to become a figure of exclusion, excluded first and for all from discourse, without a specific content to appeal to, and a discourse always to come. By confusing both figures, what they are “sharing” between them, aside from the fact that one conceals the other, would be the procedures, such as the denial of the danger that the disappeared woman could be going through by saying that their absence is voluntary or that “they must be up to something”. It is important to mention, once more, that by confusing these two figures, the disappeared is assumed as dead, so no type of state tool to conduct searches is deployed.[174]

Conversely, Julia Estela Monárrez claims that the constructed stereotype of the victims as “young women employed in the *maquiladora*” is a generalisation that absorbs all the victims’ identities into one, even though there were others with different characteristics.[175] Monárrez argues that, without developing the cultural and structural causes of one generically-defined group, men, killing a generically-defined group, women, the analysis will fall short of understanding the phenomenon. Likewise, conceding these types of stereotypes hinders the possibility of society taking seriously and with due gravity male violence against women.[176]

In that sense, these crimes against women are not isolated events, a product of individual psychopathologies, or the effect of biological urges obnubilating the minds of those who commit the crimes. As coined by Jane Caputi in Monárrez, the “cultural constructions of monstrosity” magnify masculine violence in a way that makes it approachable to the public through the figure of a human monster, a psychopathic criminal looking for women to kill.[177] It can be argued that, because this amorphous monster is precisely that, without a name and judicial cause, it can be the place of a myriad of significations and impersonations—where a certain type of equally marginal, even abject, subjectivities (*narcos,* brown, poor people, immigrants)—are made to stand in that place.

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[172] This clarification is imperative for De la Mora’s argument for building the figure of *la desaparecida* instead of the generic masculine word “desaparecido”.
[173] The word feminicide became a figure of resistance for feminism by its implication in visibilising specific forms of violence against women that, in turn, required specific forms of justice. Laksmi Adyani de Mora Martínez, *La imagen de la desaparecida. Ensayos sobre la sensibilidad* (thesis), Mexico, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos, 2022, p. 52.
[174] *Ibid.,* pp. 52-53.
[175] Monárrez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 88-89.
[176] *Ibid.,* p. 89.
[177] *Ibid.,* p. 90.

Thus, Monárrez, citing Cameron and Frazer, argues that feminicides are possibilities defined by culture, and these *anti*social acts are by no means *a*social: they are mostly conformed and based on existing social significations.[178] The idea that violence is a cultural problem will be present throughout the project. As sustained by Blair, "culture is not only not the opposite of violence, but that the latter assumes the forms of a culture in a given society".[179] This argument allows us to ponder the culturally designated subjectivities that feed the economic, power, and death structures in Juárez and all of Mexico.

More recently, the murders of women in Juárez have been partially obscured by the overwhelming presence of organised crime. However, as Segato recounts regarding her visit to the city in 2004, the feminicides remain as present and unintelligible as back then.[180] It is therefore indispensable, as many authors have noted, to understand the social constructions *in* and *of* Ciudad Juárez from the perspective of the women's murders, and the causes that originated feminicides; these are, for Monárrez, Flores and García intrinsically connected.[181]

Thus, Monárrez, Flores and García ask, "why Ciudad Juárez?" referring to the explicit or implicit question for many addressing the problem of feminicides in this city.[182] Ciudad Juárez, as Segato so eloquently describes it, is the emblematic place of economic globalisation and neoliberalism; it has an insatiable thirst for profit.[183] Juárez represents "the direct relationship between capital and death, between unregulated accumulation and concentration and the sacrifice of poor, brown, mestizo women, devoured by the aperture

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[178] *Loc. Cit.*

[179] "It is perhaps convenient to clarify this reflection in terms of the reading made by wide sectors of the country regarding the violent act as a fruit of the action of the 'bad ones', whilst they keep believing that 'the good ones are the majority'. The reading we do of violent death precisely allows showing that those 'good ones' are, at the same time, the theatre and spectators of an action—violent—that is only signified in us, with us and, not infrequently, by us: by that stage and that spectator. Or, how many massacres are not produced to eradicate the victims, to eradicate those who are their spectators through violence? How many violent actions are given in function of a third party, in this case, the spectator?" Elsa Blair, *Muertes violentas. La teatralización del exceso,* Medellín, Editorial Universidad de Antioquía, 2004, pp. 8-9.

[180] For Segato, according to Roberto Ponce-Cordero, "the lack of intelligibility of the crime wave is not a result of the complexity of its influencing factors and its implications for social relations among a multitude of subjects in different places and cultures, but a part of the assumed conspiracy itself, a strategy used by the culprits in order to better remain in impunity". Roberto Ponce-Cordero, *A dynamo of violent stories: reading the* feminicidios *of Ciudad Juárez as narratives* (thesis)*,* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2016, p. 152.

[181] Julia E. Monárrez, Raúl Flores Simental, Diana Lizeth García Salinas, "La ciudad y el feminicidio en los textos académicos", in Monárrez Fragoso, Julia Estela *et al.,* coords., *Violencia contra las mujeres e inseguridad ciudadana en Ciudad Juárez,* Tijuana, Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2010, p. 65.

[182] *Ibid.,* p. 70.

[183] Segato, La escritura en el cuerpo…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 11.

that articulates monetary economy and symbolic economy, resource control, and the power of death".[184] This leads Segato to consider feminicides not only as a gender issue, but as corporate crimes "and, more specifically, they are crimes of the second State, of the parallel State".[185]

> Violence courses through Juárez like a steady wind, and we insist it is a battle between cartels, or between the state and the drug world, or between the army and the forces of darkness. However, consider this possibility: violence is now woven into the very fabric of the community and has no single cause and no single motive, and no on-off button. Violence is not a part of life: now it is life.[186]

Ciudad Juárez is now a signifier of the worst degradation of the country and society, the place not where everything goes to die but where everything is born lifeless. It is where everyone can kill with impunity, where violent drives can find an object to discharge their tension without [social and legal] repercussions, and where everything is fear and pain. It is the place that evidences the most perverse logics of biopolitics and necropolitics—which will be addressed in chapter four. Ostensibly, this signifier produced by a mixture of truth, fiction, and political interests is a reiteration of the discourse of the monster. That is the tautology that Ciudad Juárez is the place of the production of the monster because monsters inhabit Ciudad Juárez and invade it with their monstrousness.

> It has become almost customary at this point for critics to quote Roberto Bolaño's well-known answer to an interview question, what is hell like?: "Like Cuidad [*sic.*] Juárez, which is our curse and our mirror, the unquiet mirror of our frustrations and of our vile interpretation of freedom and our desires".[187]

The image created by Bolaños' words epitomises the ultimate vision of death, despair, and demand by which we think of Ciudad Juárez: hell. For Zavala, citing other academics, this image is a mythological representation where "all social space in the city to its most exceptional levels of violence".[188] Zavala argues that there is a tendency for some theoretical approaches to the problems of drug trafficking and feminicides to reproduce what they were analysing.[189] For instance, he states that Sergio González Rodríguez and Jean

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[184] *Loc. Cit.*
[185] *Ibid.,* p. 42.
[186] Charles Bowden in Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity,* United States of America, Duke University Press, 2013, p. 216.
[187] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 108.
[188] Thus, Vigueras explains, Bolaño's work has become the master signifier of this continuous mythologisation of Ciudad Juárez present in practically all fields of cultural production about the region, among which 2666 stands out as "the masterpiece of juárica literature". *Ibid.,* pp. 108-109.
[189] *Ibid.,* p. 110.

Franco's—both cited in this project—approximation to the problem "promotes the implausible action of a serial killer and that views gender violence as a cultural practice standardized by society itself".[190]

Instead, Zavala argues for a more balanced vision, such as Molly Molloy's arguments, who concludes that the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez are built on discursive myths. Molloy bases her argument on the findings of Albuquerque and Vemala, many assumptions of the type of victim, and the predominance of feminicides in this city compared to others in Mexico and the world.[191] She finds that they do not correspond to the constructed myths. Similar to Monárrez's argument presented earlier, "the notion that female victims in Ciudad Juárez are young maquiladora workers unfortunately leaves a large number of victims out of the debate who do not fit into this stereotype".[192]

Dissonant perspectives are included here because of the existent possibility that the complexity of this problem is such that it cannot be resolved in a single position. Zavala's claim that the mythification of violence as the representation of Ciudad Juárez shows the level of critique we need to not fall into simplistic and enabling stereotypes is equally essential for this project as Segato's thoughts on the precarity and marginality of the city intersect with the bodies of women as the staging and exhibition of the power of death and cruelty. In this sense, both authors' thoughts, even from disagreeing perspectives, suggest something vital for analysing: the traces on and over the bodies of women and the visual representations we have of this city and these women.

In *2666,* a posthumous novel by Roberto Bolaño, there are vivid forensic scenes that trace images of the bodies of women found in Santa Teresa—which is Bolaños' construction of Ciudad Juárez. The images elicited by Bolaños' writing in *2666*, loaded with details of the cruelty their bodies were subjected to, concede, at the same time, a recognition for the countless victims that had not been named, acknowledged, nor regarded. Other images produced and circulated by the media not only fail in subjectifying the bodies of these women, but they also achieve their re-victimisation, the reiteration of discourses that punish them for the possibility of the crimes committed against them. In the words of Alice Driver:

> The media and other cultural producers often turn to images of naked, raped, mutilated bodies, as if a confession could be extracted from the body in that

[190] *Ibid.,* p. 112.
[191] "As Molloy notes, this careful statistical study shows that the average rate of femicide in Ciudad Juárez is similar to that of US cities such as Los Angeles and Houston, and even lower than that of several cities in northern Mexico", *Ibid.,* p. 112.
[192] *Ibid.,* p. 113.

> manner. The demands placed on the female body in assessing and confining perceived sexuality in both life and death are evident in the discourse on feminicide.[193]

U.S.-born journalist Charles Bowden was one of the most emblematic figures who covered the violence in Ciudad Juárez. He is cited in most works regarding the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez not because of how he positioned the concept[194] but because of the thorough and poignant analyses of the violences lived here. One of his most notorious publications, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future,* is a visual-textual suggestion of everyday life in Juárez, examining all the exploitation, poverty, violence, drug trafficking, and others.

Amongst the many images included in this publication, there is one[195] that stands [far] out. I arrived late to this image, close to the end of the research, and, even amongst the hundreds of images I have seen for this project, this one caught me by surprise in the strong affects it ensued. In a way, I included this section, a section not considered before, because there is no speaking of this image. It arrests thought and is pure sadness, horror, revolt, but, above all, sorrow. Because with this image, speech stopped, writing needed to force itself through.

Even if the image is the colour of earth, with gold tones layering it, against the white of the page that follows, the features distorted, the upside-down angle confusing—an element that I was only able to identify the second time I opened the book to regard this image—, and one could very well take a second to understand what this image is showing, there is no mistake: this is what I am seeing. Next to the image, on the opposite page, reads "Jaime Bailleres. *A raped and murdered woman found in Chamizal park*". Sliding past the signature of the photographer, his name appearing first, there is the title that neither explains the image nor the subject in it. More than the questions of why include it or even the questionable narrative Bowden proposes on the next page[196], there are just questions.

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[193] Alice Driver, *More or less dead. Feminicide, Haunting, and the Ethics of Representation in Mexico,* United States of America, The University of Arizona Press, 2015, p. 9.

[194] According to Ponce-Cordero, Bowden "doubted that the crime wave and the *feminicidios* were discreet phenomena that could be separated from the engulfing violence that had come to dominate life in the city, most likely as a preamble of the expansion of this new, violent way of life to the whole world". Ponce-Cordero, *Op. Cit.,* p. 282.

[195] Charles Bowden, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future",* Hong Kong, Everbest Printing Company, Ltd., 1998, p. 66.

[196] "Jaime Bailleres has projected a beautiful black carved mask on the screen. The head is tilted and the face smooth with craftmanship. The hair is long and black. It takes a moment for me to get past this beauty and realize the face is not a mask. She is a sixteen-year-old girl and they found her in the park by the Puente Libre linking Juárez to El Paso, Texas". *Ibid.,* p. 67.

There are personal, subjective, social, academic, political, and ethical questions. Questions that, as this section has tried to convey, cannot be answered. The silence produced questions. Perhaps these are questions tending towards Bowden's manner of conceiving the future:

> I am in a tiny minority on this matter. I see no new order emerging but rather a new way of life, one beyond our imagination and the code words we use to protect ourselves from life and violence. In this new way of life, no one is really in charge and we are all in play. The state still exists – there are police, a president, congress, agencies with names studded across the buildings. Still, something has changed, and I feel this change in my bones. The violence has crossed class lines. The violence is everywhere. The violence is greater. And the violence has no apparent and simple source. It is like the dust in the air, part of life itself.[197]

Perhaps Bowden anticipated a type of subjectivity where there are questions that the figure of the invisible monster and the ultra-visible victim cannot answer. In Ciudad Juárez, we see technique and science mixed with horror: the forensic, voyeur, and *jouissance* gaze—the forensic jumping to the cultural consumption and vice versa. Here, we still see faces, what is left of them. We also see the depth of violence, cruelty, despair, melancholy, terror, horror, abjection, and enjoyment that characterise today's Mexico. What we *see* but, specifically, what we live and *are* of today's Mexico.

> Said in another way: I do not affirm that we are implicated simply because the crimes attack us, make us suffer, or offend us. Rather, it is in a rigorous technical sense that I allow myself to affirm that the exhibition of a discretional dominion over the life and death of the inhabitants of this border territory, represented and inscribed in the bodies of its women as a document, as an edict, a decree's undisputable conviction, is the staging of a dialogue established with the law and every one of us that within it seek refuge. Those murders, destined to be exhibited before us of an intense death capacity, mastery for cruelty and sovereign domain over a territory, tell us that it is a foreign jurisdiction, occupied, over which we cannot interfere. And it is precisely because we disagree with this, because we do not think of Ciudad Juárez as being outside of Mexico or the world, that we have to take charge of the position of antagonistic interlocutors, critical, in disagreement, in which the murders place us.[198]

[197] Ponce-Cordero, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 284-285.
[198] Segato, La escritura en el cuerpo…, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 46-47.

Chapter two: unlearning the War Against Drug Trafficking

> You're asking me, "Does it worsen things to show corpses or does it help things?" No one [on] earth knows.
> —Charles Bowden[199]

> The atrocities of our century happen amid the absence of a language that can make sense of them.
> —María Victoria Uribe[200]

Following the last chapter and interlude's contextualisation of the Dirty War and the events following this period until 2006, this chapter will build on that transition to introduce the context of the war against drug trafficking, or the war against the *narco* as it is commonly referred to in Spanish. This war transformed the words used to describe enemies from insurgents, dissidents, *guerrilleros*, subversives, and students, amongst other nouns used to signify the enemy, to the all-encompassing *narco*. This chapter will explore the contemporary enemies of the State in the form of drug traffickers, or *narco*, which is used to incorporate all those involved in various criminal activities and violences.

Albeit considering similarities and even continuities between the State's enemies, important differentiations lead to exploring the extreme forms contemporary violence can take. By building on the previously introduced tensions between language and image, this chapter explores the appearance of violences as failures of language. In turn, this allows for subsequent analyses of images of violence and their implications in furthering those failures.

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[199] Charles Bowden in an interview with Alice Driver in Alice Driver, More or less dead*, Op. Cit.*, p. 50.

[200] María Victoria Uribe Alarcón, "Antropología de la humanidad. Un ensayo interpretativo sobre el terror en Colombia" *(*FROM*,* 28 March, 2022: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317350412_Antropologia_de_la_Inhumanidad_Un_ensayo_interpretativo_sobre_el_terror_en_Colombia).

Hence, this chapter develops how violence comes to be in a social setting and focuses on the subjective and social formations that symbolise or not violence by verbalising it.

Consequently, this chapter will contextualise the war against drug trafficking as constructed *with* and *for* a social imaginary through symbolic elements. However, this is only possible from a particular perspective, the one that credits what has happened, the historical events—therein lies the connection to chapter one. In other words, symbolic elements only come to shape and can be named by what we already know them to have been; conversely, it is another matter to study incipient or considerably new symbolisms. Therefore, the approach suggested for critically addressing the imaginary and symbolic elements of the war will come from Zavala's argument of *unlearning* the narratives of the *narco* and the cartels.

The chapter will begin with a brief remark on violence and its differentiation from other acts and events often equated to violence. Next, a discussion on the *nota roja* and its different perceptions regarding violence and image will ensue. Finally, the chapter will explore the appearance and subsequent societal incorporation of neologisms and images depicting the war against drug trafficking. These will be approached as forms of a state discourse that transformed the State enemy from the guerrilla fighters and insurrectionists to the *narco*. As Zavala argues, "over the decades, the state's administration of the drug trade has successfully constructed an empty signifier in the notion of the *narco*, visible in the pernicious network of hegemonic power, and in most academic studies that validate its assumed ubiquity".[201]

The images and news articles included here have constructed the actors involved in the problem—including the dichotomies of victims-victimisers, the State, the enemies, and the general public. I will examine how images depict the 'enemy' through the textual and visual signifiers that are articulated under the umbrella of the amorphous *narco*. By addressing these images, I will be able to contextualise the problem of violence in Mexico whilst incorporating the State's strategies of criminalising certain bodies.

[201] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 57.

On violence

Violence is a central concept in this research, and it is one of the most complex ones to develop. The word is often overused, even in times like ours when we hear and witness more immediate explosions of its acts. With the advent of mass media communications, 'violence' as an expression or concept has been infused with varied connotations. Whilst it can signify, describe, and enunciate a multiplicity of actions, situations, events, conditions, and even people, not every conception of violence can be labelled as such. It is common to hear a range of situations that, even when some of its characteristics can be perceived as violent, may be differentiated by other forms such as aggression, cruelty, and sadism. This section will develop an overview of the term violence as a foundation for this project and hereby demonstrate from which perspectives the concept of violence will be employed.

Because violence forms an intrinsic part of the history of humanity, it has consequently evolved to take many forms. Martín Baró remarks that a starting point to analyse the phenomenon of violence must be situated in recognition of its complexity.[202] Violence has leapt to describe not only acts but other qualities of *excess*. Psychoanalyst Isidoro Berenstein would argue that the analysis of violence makes sense only when referring to the subject; otherwise, it only circulates as an abstract discourse.[203] He explains that, commonly, when we refer to violence, we do it as "a quality of certain actions, associated to strong emotions linked to aggression, with a characteristic of excess in the sentiment of no tolerance to the limits offered by another subject".[204]

Berenstein frames the excess of violence on the idea of a "plus of destructiveness added to the act and qualifies it, giving it a sense of rupture from its original form, of savagery[205] or degradation".[206] Thus, the calculation of violence could only come from an abstract approximation to excess, the *plus of destructivity*. Because of the nature of excess,

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[202] "Not only are there multiple forms of violence, qualitatively different, but the events have different levels of signification and diverse historical effects. Hence, violence can be focused from different perspectives, some more encompassing and totalising than others. However, as perspectives, they constitute partial or limited visions. Pretending to absolutise any of these perspectives constitutes a form of reductionism, all the more dangerous when identifying the reality of violence with one of its levels or dimensions contributes to conceal and even justify the same violence in other dimensions or levels". Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Acción e ideología. Psicología desde Centroamérica,* El Salvador, UCA Editores, 4th ed., 1990, pp. 364-365.
[203] Isidoro Berenstein, "Notas sobre la violencia", in *Psicoanálisis ApdeBA*, Vol. XXII, no. 2, p. 257.
[204] *Loc. Cit.*
[205] "Ensañamiento" in Spanish.
[206] Berenstein, *Ibid.,* p. 257.

deviation and rupture representing *more than,* 'violence' has been relocated as a noun. Berenstein explains the noun "not only as a quality but as the name of an action or a group of actions that consist in invading the other's limits to exercise over them an imposition of force through a (muscular) force component".[207]

I depart from a psychoanalytic conception of violence that refuses to moralise and constrain the concept of violence.[208] Psychoanalysis has, from its beginnings, highlighted that violence is situated in the nucleus of the human.[209] In *Civilization and its discontents,* Freud shows that human beings are not "gentle creatures" but subjects endowed with "a powerful share of aggressiveness".[210] Hence, enabling the co-existence of individuals falls on the mandates of civilisation and the restraint of [aggressive] impulses. Were it not for the demands of civilisation and culture, the other could be the depositary of the human's frustration, pain, and misery. Nevertheless, it is this primary "mutual hostility" that constantly threatens the civilised society with disintegration.[211]

The threat of disintegration leads to the organisation of a society based on compromises "whose desire to persist and unify its people depends on laws that themselves ultimately rest upon the threat (or actuality) of a 'compelling use of violence' to make its members comply with them".[212] Herein lies Jacques Lacan's focus on the inherent relationship between culture, symbol, and law.[213] According to psychoanalyst Daniel Gerber, the law "is the product of a constitutive violence of the human world: the violence of language and the symbolic order that come to establish culture and history and an essentially *anti-natural* order".[214]

Language is fundamental for a psychoanalytic approximation to violence—particularly from a Lacanian perspective. For Lacan, an interhuman relationship can produce

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[207] *Loc. Cit.*
[208] "Psychoanalysis in its compromise with the reality of its time, in its approach to the discontents of civilisation, has a singular gaze that contributes to these analyses, not from a perspective of omniscient discipline, but an ethical position". Ana María Careaga, "Subjetividad y lazo social. Efectos del terrorismo de Estado", in Ipar, Ezekiel, Tonkonoff, Sergio, eds., *Teoría, política y sociedad. Reflexiones críticas desde América Latina*, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, CLACSO, p. 85.
[209] Daniel Gerber, "El estúpido encanto de la violencia", in Red Analítica Lacaniana, ed., *El psicoanálisis ante la violencia,* Mexico, Errancia, 2005, p. 1.
[210] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume XXI (1927-1931)*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1961, p. 111.
[211] *Ibid.,* p. 112.
[212] Juliet Flower MacCannell, "The end(s) of violence", in Sinclair, Vanessa and Steinkoler, Manya, eds., *On psychoanalysis and violence. Contemporary Lacanian perspectives,* New York, Routledge,2019, p. 33.
[213] Gerber, El estúpido encanto de la violencia, *Op. Cit,* p. 4.
[214] *Loc. Cit.*

either words or violence because language marks a limit to or of violence. A well-known Lacanian maxim that will be expanded on in the following chapter, "the unconscious is structured like a language", relates to the idea that "the psychoanalytic subject is immersed in a universe ruled by desire and determined by a social order ushered in by language acquisition".[215] Sinclair and Steinkoler phrase Lacan's development of the primal repression—initially coined by Freud—as "an originary violence of being subject to language".[216]

From Freudian and Lacanian perspectives, violence is at the core of the human experience. However, not all uses or discourses referring to violence accurately employ the term. As Jeannet Quiroz argues, even if used as a noun, the word violence needs to be accompanied by other terms that contain and delimit it. Otherwise, this would incur in a banality of the term rather than deepening the understanding of it; using it so extensively makes the word signify less every time.[217] Similarly, Silvia Duschatzky argues in favour of displacing and turning the discourse of violence towards new ways of thinking "the indecipherable, disturbing, the crashes between bodies, the tensions, and obstacles in common" from a position that questions the potency of chaos.[218]

Similarly, Arthur Kleinman states that the current taxonomies of violence are "inadequate to understand either the uses of violence in the social world or the multiplicity of its effects in experiences of suffering, collective and individual".[219] Kleinman's use of the word's plural helps locate the plurality of experiences that can be deemed violent. This leads to examining and differentiating categories that are indifferently employed when referring to violence, such as aggressivity, hatred, sadism, and cruelty.

Baró develops the concept of violence by differentiating it from aggressivity. He says that violence is a broader concept than aggressivity because "in theory, every act to which a dose of excessive force is applied can be considered violence".[220] Violence consists of a

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[215] Patricia Gherovici, "Terror and the unconscious. Psychoanalysis in Argentina 1976-1983", in Sinclair, Vanessa and Steinkoler, Manya, eds., *On psychoanalysis and violence. Contemporary Lacanian perspectives,* New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 204.
[216] Vanessa Sinclair and Manya Steinkoler, "Introduction", in Sinclair, Vanessa and Steinkoler, Manya, eds., *On psychoanalysis and violence. Contemporary Lacanian perspectives,* New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 3.
[217] Jeannet Quiroz Bautista, *La subjetividad en tiempos violentos: Testimonios de jóvenes en contextos de violencia ligada al narcotráfico* (thesis), Mexico, Universidad Veracruzana, 2018, p. 14.
[218] Silvia Duschatzky, "Veo veo… ¿Qué ves? Percepciones más allá (o más acá) de la violencia", in *CS,* no.11, p. 347.
[219] Arthur Kleinman, "The Violences of Everyday Life. The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence", in Das, Veena et al., eds., *Violence and subjectivity,* California, University of California Press, 2000, p. 227.
[220] Baró, *Op. Cit.*, p. 365.

force that moves something or someone from its natural state. It has a historical character and cannot be understood outside the social context it produces.[221] Furthermore, he develops the complex subjective and social dynamics that frame violence—from the family to State and class interests. Violence, he remarks, has its rationality and justification. "This is where the rationality of violence joins the legitimacy of those who dispose of the social power".[222]

Conversely, for Baró, aggression is a form of violence in which force is applied intentionally to cause harm to another person.[223] Psychoanalysis further distinguishes between aggressivity and aggression. The first is a narcissistic position of the I, and the second is the visible conduct. Aggressivity recognises the other as kindred but also as a rival that can be annihilated if they become an obstacle, according to psychoanalyst Liliana Lamovsky.[224] Hatred goes even further by aiming for the symbolic instance of the other to erase every trace of the existence of the other. Both hatred and cruelty are ways of manifestation of the death drive.[225]

This last idea leads to a central distinction of the project, between violence and cruelty. For Jean-Luc Nancy, "cruelty takes its name from bloodshed (*cruor,* as distinct from *sanguis,* the blood that circulates in the body)".[226] The mark of cruelty is to "appropriate death: not by gazing into the emptiness of the depths, but, on the contrary, by filling his eyes with red (by 'seeing red') and with the clots in which life suffers and dies".[227] Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that the Latin conception of cruelty—the spillage of blood might not be sufficient to understand the complex nature of cruelty. He argues that the cruelty exceeds the limits suggested by its etymology in different languages and semantics. Derrida conceives this thought, together with Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, by displacing the one-sided nature of the body with cruelty and situating it as a psychic event. "A psychic cruelty would still, of course, be a cruelty of the *psyche,* a state of the soul, thus still of the living, but a nonbloody cruelty".[228]

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[221] *Ibid.,* p. 371.
[222] *Ibid* p. 375.
[223] *Ibid.,* pp. 365-366.
[224] Liliana Lamovsky, "La crueldad del sistema neoliberal", Jornadas de la Escuela Freudiana de Buenos Aires, *La erótica del poder y la crisis social*, Buenos Aires, 2002, n.p.
[225] Bermúdez, S., Meli, Y., "El odio y su fundamento pulsional", in *Anuario de investigaciones,* vol. XX, p. 71.
[226] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of Image,* New York, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 24.
[227] *Ibid.,* pp. 24-25.
[228] Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi,* California, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 238-239.

These positions come together in Ana Berezin's hypothesis that cruelty is an exclusively human feature characterised as violence directed at the other to extract pain from them.[229] Importantly, it has to do with the subject who, at the moment of exercising cruelty over the other, not only remains unmoved but gains satisfaction from obtaining the pain of the other. While sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky talks about absolute violence as an end in itself that responds to a rationalising logic, Michel Wieviorka names it cruelty when this violence seems to be determined by the pleasure that arises in the one who exercises it.[230]

In that line, Silvia Bleichmar formulates cruelty as involving "a combination of aggressivity (or violence): it recognizes the subjective character of the other, but it aims for their demolition, of their intimacy, of their identity (subjectivity) through the pain inflicted. By achieving this, the no-longer-equal is treated as an object, cruelty entails a disregard or disavowal of alterity".[231] Francisco Pereña suggests that whilst violence may be extreme, the difference with cruelty resides in the interpretation (or lack thereof) given to the act.[232]

Differentiating between these categories—violence, aggressivity, and cruelty—is fundamental to questioning the different ramifications of violence and visuality. As argued by psychoanalysis, violence is inherent to subjectivity, and it can merely be channelled, not eradicated altogether. Cruelty, on the other hand, is a severe cause for concern and an issue to confront and challenge. It attests to the tears in the social fabric and subjective articulations. The cruelty witnessed in the country ranges from the forms of giving death—presented in its staging and visualisation—to the crisis of forced disappearances. The following section interrogates a specific medium known for spectacularising death, the *nota roja.* It merits being included and looked at closely because of its predominance in

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[229] Ana N. Berezin, "La crueldad: un recorrido" (FROM, 12 April, 2015: https://www.topia.com.ar/articulos/la-crueldad-un-recorrido).

[230] Quiroz Bautista, *Op. Cit.,* p. 37.

[231] Jimena García, "Psicoanálisis y lazo social, perspectivas sobre alteridad, subjetividad, lenguaje y violencia" (FROM, 17 November, 2020: http://www.territoriodedialogos.com/psicoanalisis-y-lazo-social-perspectivas-sobre-alteridad-subjetividad-lenguaje-y-violencia/).

[232] "Cruelty requires interpretation. Cruelty requires that the original violence, the creator of the subject, be referred to as the power incarnated by the other and exercised by sadist appropriation. There are infinite forms of cruelty, from assault to the extermination of the body of the other […] In every instance, it is an instinctive exercise of power that is only verified in the real domain of the taming of body and soul. Thus, a 'sequential action' that disdains the moral act and the subject's responsibility is created. […] Violence is the disarming, the helplessness, the senselessness, the perplexity, the distress and the instinctual push in these conditions. Cruelty, on the contrary, is profiled as interpretation, dominion, taming of sense, idolatry". Francisco Pereña, *De la violencia a la crueldad. Ensayo sobre la interpretación, el padre y la mujer,* Madrid, Editorial Síntesis, 2010, pp. 187-188.

historically showing images of violence as well as aiding the creation of discourses and signifiers to convey the myriad of acts and subjects of violence.

The nota roja

The first chapter was dedicated to introducing the production of images in the context of a "war" that reflected certain particularities of the Mexican context. This context, as explained, was particularly complex due to, amongst others, the vast and diverse expanse of the territory, the myriad of insurgent groups, their interests and articulations, the authoritarian regime under the ruling party that could act with complete impunity, and severely repress the content produced by the media. Meanwhile, Mexico suggested an external appearance of a country committed to human rights and receiving exiles from other Latin American countries.[233]

Furthermore, the previous chapter intended to frame how images of dead bodies began circulating in different media. It is vital to remark that the images shown above, even those in the "dissident" magazine *Por qué?* or similar, correspond to more traditional or reputable communication media. However, images in the *nota roja* or yellow press/journalism abounded during this period, even filling in for the lack of reporting from the more institutionalised media.

Before developing that line of argument, the images shown in chapter one were chosen from those in reputable newspapers and magazines to show the incipient modes of representing the [dead] enemy. The regional and national newspapers and magazines evidence a trend still visible today of condensing the event in a few sensationalist signifiers and an accompanying image. Thus, the selection of words used to describe the insurgent groups and individuals, their acts, and their eventual incarceration, disappearance, torture or death become metonymized into signifiers such as, amongst others, 'subversive'—a word that was common throughout the region—, '*guerrillero'*, '*revoltoso'* (riotous or unruly), '*gavillero'* (explained in chapter one), or even 'student' that came to stand in for figures of disorder, violence, treason against the State, and, thus, enemies of the public and the nation.

[233] During Operation Condor, ex-President Luis Echeverría had a radically different policy towards Mexican nationals and South American exiles. Whilst persecuting, imprisoning, torturing, murdering, and disappearing people within the country, his discourse was of welcoming and solidarity with exiles from other South American dictatorships, welcoming them into the country.

Even if walking the line of associations that, for their very imaginary and symbolic natures, can have no direct empirical and direct consequence over today's understandings—that is, that an image created in the 1960s and 1970s cannot fully explain images today, and we see those images from an anachronous perspective—, we can witness the traces of one in the other. This is particularly evident in how a violent social reality was partially—and violently—constructed and largely concealed.

The traces point to the dichotomous relationships of showing whilst hiding and hiding in showing. Furthermore, they created not only practices of impunity, where torture and forced disappearances were relegated to occurrences in the frame of the battle the State was waging against communism and insurrection, amongst all the other words the power in turn used to name social struggles against social and class inequalities. Thus, they served as the basis for symbolic structures to impose a [incipiently visualised] discursive horror regime in the singular and social bodies where the public humiliation of the enemy functioned as a form of social punishment.

By questioning the perspectives from which we regard images of the past and the present[234], we can detect the emergence of a [consistent] problem of neglecting to consider images as active modes of signification of reality. More than implying that images today are copies or over-constructions of those of the 1960s and 1970s, I argue that we can find in them the traces—that may or may not be the beginning but a moment in time—of a structure that absorbs words and images into a self-referencing semblance of signification. These signifiers sustain a state of emergency where something bad or evil is constantly on the verge of happening, and we must fear its eventual occurrence. However, simultaneously, the ever-present state of paranoia, anguish, and dread it creates constrains the possibility of any future to come—even the one where something bad will happen.

That structure sees its most violent and cruel expression in today's Mexican visual culture—as will be developed throughout this and the following chapters. It sustains the constant yet sufficiently spaced-out semblance of always being on the fringe of something terrible happening, where there is always something to fear, and the creation of a sense of immediacy where the future is uncertain and grey, a permanent state of anticipation that cannot quite reach a mobilisation. The images of the Dirty War are not precursors of today's ones in a chronological sense but in a forgotten and repressed one.

[234] That is, not based on a direct link between cause and effect, for images may not operate in the same epistemological order we are used to understand other phenomena.

The lack or absence of a humanising gaze stands out in the images shown in chapter one and some of the following images. A position that can question not only the image as past or representation but as something living and active in the subjective and the social spaces it encounters. Many of these images are born out of an *a priori* implication of representing and being lifeless. The absence of singular and social sense or meaning given to the events and images coupled with the solitary navigation of a country in social and political crisis and the posterior denial or suppression of its remembrance are elements that we can question as being part of a constitutive place for the inscription of today's images of violence.

The last idea is predominant in the images produced during the period comprised in the interlude, specifically of the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez from the 1990s. One of Bowden's most notorious propositions in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* was expanded on in an interview by Alice Driver. During this interview, they discuss, amongst other things, the decision to include the images he did in the photographic-driven book. Bowden claims the editorial decided the layout and which images to include, even the haunting image mentioned in the interlude. However, they touch upon the problem of the benefits or harms of showing the images.

On the topic of the book, Bowden argues that he thought "people needed a wake-up call since the press then and for years afterwards kept talking about Juárez as this wonderful success story with gleaming maquilas".[235] Further on, Driver asks for the ethics in representing violence given that it is a photo-driven book: "Do you think everything should be shown—every dead, mutilated, beheaded body?".[236] Following Bowden's response, to which he says he has no answer—he does not know the consequences of showing or not showing—, they briefly discuss the concept porno-misery.

'Porno-misery' as a concept is helpful to think about the insistence on showing imagery in what Bowden calls *tabloids*, Driver *yellow journalism,* and, in Mexico, we call *nota roja.* In this conversation, Bowden reads in the term porno-misery the deadening effect—implicit in the assumption of pornography's completely redundant imagery—inflicted by what Driver calls "the voyeuristic exploitation of misery".[237] Bowden continues by stating that porno-misery derives from the abundant production of images reaching such a state that people do not react to them. "It's kind of like somebody in a bar having one too many drinks.

[235] Driver, *Op. Cit.,* p. 50.
[236] *Ibid.,* p. 54.
[237] *Ibid.,* p. 55.

There isn't a rule. It's a judgment […] Certainly, if you read the tabloids in Mexico, you don't think, 'This is going to stir people to action.' I'm not defending the book, but people had a real reaction to it. I think it's that they hadn't seen anything like it".[238]

> The term pornomiseria is most commonly used in debates about aesthetics of film, but I think its application to photography and literature is justified. Although it may be argued that graphic depictions of feminicide and misery are necessary to provoke awareness, it is also true that the content can be exploited. Monárrez Fragoso makes a connection between the media and the use of pornographic images when she argues, "The testimonies that are presented by the media are also part of a graphic, elaborate, pornographic description of the bodies of victims; thus, they degrade the families of the victims. These discourses take the terrible things that were done to murdered women and create a moral vacuum" (Trama de una injusticia 209). The prostitution of female bodies thus continues even after death, when images of corpses are bought and sold as part of a sensationalist news cycle. Although pornomiseria in itself seems awful and abject, it is also a part of the human condition. The reason images of bodies of feminicide victims appear so frequently in the mass media and in works of cultural production is that they reflect our curiosity to see damaged bodies, to witness destruction in the most realistic way possible. The concept of pornomiseria also relates to how the perpetrators of the crimes deal with the bodies of victims. The bodies aren't dumped; they are arranged so as to present a necroart exhibit to the public. The arrangement of bodies is not done to desensitize but to sensitize, to gain attention and recognition for the perpetrator of the crime.[239]

Whilst the term porno-misery is illustrative and certainly pertinent for Driver's and Bowden's arguments in the context of the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez, its relevance for the rest of this project is circumscribed to the commodification of images as done by the *nota roja.* This is not to say that there is not a porno-misery element in the production of images outside of this scope, as those reproduced in other, more legitimate, media, but to explore images of violence from a perspective of subjectivity and social bond, other concepts such as *jouissance* or scopic drive become more relevant.

However, because the *nota roja* plays a paradigmatic role in the proliferation of images of violence, its development as part of the psychic register proves necessary. According to Salvador Olguín, Mexican culture has included iconographic representations of death over the last one hundred years. They have evolved over time, leading to what we know today as *nota roja,* red news, as Olguín translates, or yellow press or journalism as it

[238] *Loc. Cit.*
[239] *Ibid.,* pp. 77-78.

is known in other contexts. The *nota roja* publications—whose post-mortem photographs are tainted in a sensationalist manner—involve a mixture of graphic imagery and text.[240] Mexican critic and journalist Carlos Monsiváis considers the *nota roja* as the spectacularisation of tragedy, the "aesthetic of too much blood".[241]

The *nota roja,* however, was not merely a collection of visual reports of accidents and violent crimes. As stated previously, during the Dirty War, this medium was one of the leading outlets to report on the events of the conflict—thus underlining its importance for this project. Even if *Por qué?* magazine was one of the most critical news outlets and did thorough journalism, it "did not spare bloody images of the pitched battles outcomes" of the student movement in 1968.[242] *Alarma!,* a stereotypical *nota roja* magazine, reported on events of the rural guerrilla by framing and reinforcing the official State discourse of the guerrilla leaders.

The Mexican *nota roja* condenses the explosiveness of the real and the spectacularity and the *jouissance* of the image. Adriana Hernández Manrique sustains that the visual production of the *nota roja* starts with the real—the intolerable and impossible—but is codified for the viewer. It "obeys to a partial register of the event" that even if the image is *apparently* explicit, it hides and deceives with what passes as apparent.[243] The three Lacanian registers will be developed in more depth further on. However, briefly, Hernández Manrique's proposition of the real is cited in Julio César Goyez Narváez as the failure of symbolisation that nevertheless pushes towards it by being irrepressible.

> Trapped between the symbolic and the imaginary, the real is no more than the space of the failures of symbolisation, of the irrepressible, of an 'in itself' unable to be transformed into a 'for us'. The real, then, is found beyond pleasure; it is the cause of desire and condenses the enjoyment not understood as pleasure but as horror, the 'object a' as Lacan will name it.[244]

Even if the objective of this project is not to conduct in-depth research on the *nota roja,* recognising it as the foremost reproducer of images of violence is crucial to confront

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[240] Salvador Olguín, "An Army of the Dead: Bodies and Images from the Mexican War on Drugs", in United Academics Journal of Social Sciences, vol.: 'Morbid Curiosity Part II', p. 4.
[241] Carlos Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios. Crónica de la nota roja en México,* Mexico City, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2016*,* p. 8.
[242] Carlos Martínez Assad, "Prólogo", in Monroy Nasr, Rebeca, Pulido Llano, Gabriela, Leyva, José Mariano , comps., *Nota Roja. Lo anormal y lo criminal en la historia de México*, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, 2018, p. 19.
[243] Adriana Hernández Manrique, "El problema de lo Real en la nota roja", in *Imaginario Visual,* year 3, no. 5, p. 48.
[244] Julio César Goyez Narváez, "La imagen como huella de lo real", in *Ensayos. Historia y teoría del arte,* no. 21, p. 54.

today's images of violence. This is especially so since the images published in the context of the nota roja marked the framing of the body as bearers of messages to fulfil "an instructive lesson for the government, civil population or enemy" and are present in most newsstands in the country.[245] Consequently, these images are crucial to position the discussion of the viewing subject and their effects on subjectivity as Hernández Manrique does when situating the subject in the middle of that experience as the one who will make contact with the real: the subject that emerges from witnessing death as an end.[246]

The *nota roja* makes the reader, apparently contradictorily, try to place their world in a parenthesis. It is a hiper-realism where the imaginary repurposes the real into a transformation of something else "to make it forget itself, to deconstruct it under the image of its own appearances".[247] Laurent Aubague, in the same line as Julia Tuñón, suggests that the *nota roja* offers some type of catharsis. For Aubague, it is:

> An uplifting of life against death and the imaginary assuming its participation in the reconstruction of the reality struck by fatality. The nota roja as catharsis translates as the liberation of anguish, meaning that this very same anguish is one of the daily instances of life. The nota roja is the inverted discourse of the biological imperative against its own destruction. The catharsis becomes a spectacle of the negative to reaffirm the positive. The catharsis is thus proof of the ani-proof. In the spectacle of photography, the imaginary functions as a metaphor: it displaces the representation of reality's facts towards an ultimate signification corresponding to the symbolic denunciation of this reality, making it say the contrary of what it represents. The true discourse of the nota roja is its reverse. It would silence it to be able to say it at the moment the reader interprets it.[248]

For Tuñón, the *nota roja* delves into descriptions of the cadavers, the sadism, the masochism, and the necrophilia of real events, and that is where the difficulty in seeing them resides. However, Tuñón continues, they are presented as consummated, as something that has happened, that belongs to another other—that of the has been—when "the fire of passion has turned to ashes".[249] In that sense, for her, the *nota roja* includes a desire for order that is satisfied in the presence of the police presence in the nota roja. For Tuñón, the

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[245] Hernández Manrique, *Op. Cit.,* p. 49.
[246] *Loc. Cit.*
[247] Laurent Aubague, "Alarma y las imágenes de la muerte: de lo imaginario cultural a la función ideológica", in *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporáneas,* vol. 1, no. 2, p. 161.
[248] *Ibid.,* p. 149.
[249] Julia Tuñón, "Nota roja, cultura y transgresión. Notas para problematizar", in Monroy Nasr, Rebeca, Pulido Llano, Gabriela, Leyva, José Mariano , comps., *Nota Roja. Lo anormal y lo criminal en la historia de México*, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, 2018, p. 54.

drama is domesticated over the development of the process by its marking with official stamps, thus uninvesting the tragic aura entering the bureaucratic world and the questionable realm of tabloids and massive communication media.[250] The cathartic component for the author comes from the possibility of expulsing the abject from the drama that has entered the police order.[251]

It is unclear if Tuñón refers to the fact that the *nota roja* journalists are called to a crime scene that is the site of their condition as journalists, and, if there is a crime scene, there is a police presence. Likewise, it is unclear if the whole medium or the singular image can result in the viewer's catharsis. This is particularly important to ponder when she next enquires if the *nota roja* mobilises culture or, even more, if it can be considered art or, on the contrary, if it is only an abject cultural industry that must be censured.[252] Can the *nota roja,* as can be extracted from the following lines[253], be represented as sublimation?

Because this research does not focus predominantly on the *nota roja*—and there resides the decision not to include visual examples[254]—the previous authors' ruminations on the *nota roja* are interesting and suggestive for approaching images in ensuing chapters. The *nota roja* has become a way of seeing images. It has become the imaginary by which we approach the images in other media, including similar or reminiscent ones. The question is no longer for the appearance of images; they have become all too common. The question is about the possibility of symbolising these images, bringing them down from their imaginary wanderings and encountering the real. Those possibilities can become more evident in the study of subjectivity and the social bond, which will be developed in the following chapters.

The traces of contemporary ways of framing images can now be appreciated not only from the perspective of the enemies of the State but also of the dispensable, precarious bodies in Mexico through a gaze that consumes and exploits these subjectivities. The ways of framing images since 2006 do not necessarily amount to the sum of past positional gazes, for instance, those of the Dirty War or the feminicides of Ciudad Juárez. It cannot be affirmed that the images from the Dirty War, or those of the feminicides, nor their framing in the *nota*

[250] *Loc. Cit.*
[251] *Loc. Cit.*
[252] *Ibid.,* pp. 54-55.
[253] "In a psychological dimension that also concerns ethics and aesthetics, the sinister is revulsive but can be represented through sublimation as well, whereas the abject fall out of 'the order of things'. The limits for the consideration of art have expanded, but can we think of the nota roja as art?". *Ibid.,* p. 55.
[254] These are easily accessible through an online search, for instance, in https://bit.ly/3ZahU4A.

roja make up the totality of what we are witnessing today in terms of visual culture or singular images of violence in Mexico.

Nevertheless, some elements contain traces that become reinvested and rearticulated with contemporary technologies and subjectivities through that same logic. Going back to the query over Tuñón's argument regarding the singular image of the journalistic genre[255], we are pressed to consider both aspects in the course of this research, both the production of images of a specific aesthetic, affective, and political connotations and the genre that reproduces them.

Moreover, the link in consideration of the reinvestment of traces over the production of a particular type of image, images of violence, is made through the perspective of memory as a medium. A medium of yielding "those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights-like torsos in a collector's gallery".[256] Thus, more than pausing the discussion on the cathartic, sublimated, or artistical capabilities of the *nota roja* over other visual genres, it is through their archival, mnemonic, subjectivity-constructing potency. That is, when images of violence become an active part and agent in the archives, transcending their time through a visualisation that writes their own memory. In that sense, it is crucial to note that there tends to be an evident connection between the *nota roja* and the exacerbation of the production of images of violence from 2006.

> The practice of taking pictures of the dead came out of the pages of *la nota roja* and rushed to the center of Mexico's public arena in a dramatic way after 2006. It also took on a new, more gruesome meaning. In the summer of 2006, local newspapers in the State of Baja California reported that the headless bodies of three police officers and a US citizen had been abandoned north of the town of Rosarito, [sic.] Their heads were later found in Tijuana. A convoy of 100 hit men had kidnapped, tortured and killed them, later disposing of their remains in the manner described above, while local authorities were unable to stop them. A few months later, in September of that same year, twenty people dressed in black entered a nightclub in the southern state of Michoacán, and left the heads of five men on the dance floor.[257]

[255] To this, in the conclusion of the essay, Tuñón clarifies that the nota roja is a genre and that even if, as such, it implies a signification code, we cannot homogenise their content as identical products. There can even be, she continues, authors whose content does not fall within the category of abjection. Tuñón, *Op. Cit.,* p. 56.
[256] Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory", in *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2,* United States of America, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999 p. 576.
[257] Olguín, *Op. Cit.,* p. 5.

The opposing argument, as Luis Hernández Navarro does, can be made. For Hernández Navarro, "Mexico has become a country of *nota roja.* It is not a matter of perception. It is an issue of facts".[258] The journalist argues that it is not due to the exaggeration of communication media that this is so, but that the media reproduces the reality of the country, they reflect, not invent. The press today, Hernández Navarro continues, is no "redder" than before, "it is the reality that has been modified and has made criminal acts a daily matter".[259]

In a way, Hernández Navarro's argument resonates with the arguments in chapter one and the interlude. There has always been some inclusion of violence into the front pages of newspapers, however censured and framed by official powers or spectacularised by the *nota roja*. However, due to the nature of the political party in power and the politics of invisibilising anything that appeared to put the idea of the State at stake[260], as well as the considerable differences in the number of events, it would be difficult to affirm that the media only reflects the Mexican reality.

The logic behind this argument dates to the eternal philosophical questions of the origin. Even if the question could be quickly settled in terms of the logical appearance of a crime—in Hernández Navarro's terms—first, and the curious gaze over it second, the varied positions present in the stages of an image[261] indicate the complex layers unsettling a simple causal relationship. Whilst no image can fabricate a crime for it to exist as an image, a different violence comes into play dually from the violence in creating an image out of a violent act and the visualised violence that drives the production of the violent act.

> Ideas are abstract, and only through diverse representations can they be concretised, understood and transmitted, and images are a prime example of representations. Cornelius Castoriadis explained over thirty years ago that they are not simply expressions of a reality previously constructed, an idea derived from the Platonic cave in which reality is solely a reflection, but they are a medullar and constructive part of that reality, "figurations or presentifications of significations or meaning" that construct ideas, express the imaginary and concretise it, sometimes they also stereotype it, all of which comes into play in a world of shared significations.[262]

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[258] Luis Hernández Navarro, "El país de la nota roja. La ley mordaza", in Monroy Nasr, Rebeca, Pulido Llano, Gabriela, Leyva, José Mariano, comps., *Nota Roja. Lo anormal y lo criminal en la historia de México*, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, 2018, p. 408.
[259] *Loc. Cit.*
[260] In this case, a single ruling political party in metonymy for the State.
[261] From the event itself, its framing, the click of the camera, the decision to keep that image, its reproduction, viewing, forgetting, archiving, recollection, and other stages.
[262] Tuñón, *Op. Cit.,* p. 45.

Mexico has witnessed the construction of these mutually signified violences and images. It has become so that one is not without the other inverting parts of the former visualisations of violence. Violence, whilst complex enough on its own, becomes even more entangled when thinking of the uses and reception of its image. An argument that will be sustained throughout the project is that violent acts have been, in a way, predisposed to be framed in an image: they assume a gaze. Thus, there are violent acts that are staged for their eventual capture into an image.

This last argument will be developed further on to examine the construction of a violent visuality. However, returning to Hernández Navarro's argument that the media cannot ignore Mexico's increasingly violent reality, he states that "the press constructs a reality customised to its public, it does not invent it".[263] He continues to argue that how media narrates events in the manner of the *nota roja* is a moral reflection of our time and our country. Following a series of emblematic social and political events from 2006 onwards, Hernández Navarro states that the history of Felipe Calderón's presidency was told through the nota roja of newspapers, not in the official articles and discourses.

Despite the shortcomings in this argument, which is limited to a sectioned perspective over the myriad of possible ones, an important element stands out from the journalist's claim: Mexico's violent reality could not be contained in the discourses surrounding the supposed war on drugs that Calderón carried out against drug traffickers during his presidency. This is not to claim that the *nota roja*—or any media, for that matter—can claim to be an accurate representation or metonymy for the state of a country and its people. Nevertheless, the imagery that the nota roja created and its spillage and adaption into other media can become a ground for studying subjective and social realities—whether moral, cultural or political.

Following the exploration of the abject visuality created by the nota roja, its representation and dissemination of violence and cruelty, and the way it has contributed to a structure of tautological parameters of violence, the next section will complement the analysis with an exploration of the linguistic and visual production of the war on drugs. This will be done through certain remarks on how war has been waged in the country—turning, again, to the Dirty War—and the contemporary forms of horror and the infliction of fear through image-text signifiers.

[263] Hernández Navarro, *Op. Cit.,* p. 408.

The war against evil

In 2006, just a few days into his Presidency, right-wing Felipe Calderón declared what came to be known as the War Against Drug Trafficking—from here referred to indistinctly as the war against the narco or the war on drugs, as it is usually referred to in Spanish. It is common to hear and see the initial reference to this war portrayed in Calderon's appearance in Michoacán dressed in military uniform.[264] Calderón gave unsatisfactory—proven false or inadequate—arguments for his decision.

According to César Morales Oyarvide, five arguments and reasons were used in this expedition against drug trafficking groups and operations. One claimed that Mexico was no longer a country of transit but one of consumption and further alerting to the danger of drugs reaching children and youth. A second argument maintained that there had been an increase in Mexican people's feelings of insecurity caused by drug trafficking-related violence. A third one is that traffickers were disputing the State's territorial control. The fourth is not an argument made by Calderón but rather an idea that took hold in the society stemming from the failure of the government's arguments for the war. Given that his presidential election was tainted with irregularities and political and social conflicts, Calderón sought to be legitimately recognised in the Presidency and used the declaration of war to this end. The final reason was to elevate the problem from one of public security to national security.[265]

Many authors suggest that there should be quotation marks around the word 'war' following the unsatisfactory arguments and reasons exemplified in the above paragraph and point to the inherent flaws in launching an attack without a strategy, question the real reasons behind it, and hereby elucidate the calculated or uncalculated effects it has had in the country.[266] The war, as it has been hinted at in the previous sections, has resulted in a [highly visualised] spiral of violence and cruelty. It ranges from comparatively minor crimes to executions, tortures, disappearances and extreme inflictions of pain and degradation of

[264] As Hernández Navarro narrates, on 3 January 2007, in his first public activity of the year, Calderón had his portrait taken in full uniform. Hernández Navarro, *Op. Cit.,* p. 411.
[265] César Morales Oyarvide, "La guerra contra el narcotráfico en México. Debilidad de Estado, orden local y fracaso de una estrategia", in *Aposta. Revista de Ciencias Sociales,* no. 50, pp. 9-15.
[266] Because I sustain and base this project on the flawed premise of the word and its actions, I will not use grammatical quotation marks on the word war. Furthermore, because the word war is used both in the context of the Dirty War and the war against the narco, I find a continuity worth exploring, particularly to think of how these words have become self-referencing signifiers in varied discourses.

bodies. We witness daily discoveries of unmarked mass graves, beheadings, hanging bodies from bridges, bodies wrapped in blankets or dismembered and placed into black bin bags, and countless accounts of what Calderón's government called 'collateral damage'.

As Vicente Ovalle notes, the counterinsurgency of the 1960s and 1970s and the war on drugs cannot be placed into a single line of continuity. They do, however, have an articulation in common, historically and logically. Following the introduction of neoliberalism towards the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, Vicente Ovalle formulates, "two State strategies, differentiated in their origin and purpose, coincide and show their elective affinities".[267] That is, the counterinsurgent combat of 'guerrilleros' and 'subversives' and the first war on drugs—the Operation Condor in Mexico that was addressed in chapter one. This last one facilitated new material and institutional conditions for generalised counterinsurgent practices in the country.[268] Vicente Ovalle focuses on the generalisation of forced disappearances today as a practice whose employment dates to expertise gained from the counterinsurgent period.[269]

One of the objectives of the war on drugs, as argued by Illades and Santiago, was to put the subaltern classes into order, even if the openly declared enemy was organised crime. According to the authors, this was directed at disarming the resistance to modernisation in favour of private interests.[270] Interestingly, however, the authors recognise that for Calderón—right-winged, catholic, and conservative—combating drug trafficking was analogous to combating Evil itself. It was, thus, a just cause, "the hell that has become the lives of hundreds of thousands of people is justified in the name of that supreme end".[271]

Evil appears to be a common thread lurking in the social bond: from Bowden's recounting of a fruit vendor's expression regarding the violence in Ciudad Juárez saying that "even the devil is scared of living here"[272] to the violent imaginary that the amorphous organised crime, or drug trafficking for Calderón. Psychoanalyst Mirta Goldstein explains that evil can sometimes be categorised as events and, as such, occur in the real. Because their appearance modifies the real, they are subsequently represented, nominated, or symbolically elaborated.

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[267] Vicente Ovalle, *Op. Cit.,* p. 332.
[268] *Loc. Cit.*
[269] *Ibid.,* p. 24.
[270] Illades and Santiago, *Op. Cit.,* p. 11.
[271] *Ibid.,* p. 14.
[272] Charles Bowden, "*from* While You Were Sleeping" (FROM, 4 September, 2023: https://lannan.georgetown.edu/past-guests/charles-bowden/#).

> Evil occurs in the real and is later represented, nominated and/or symbolically elaborated, for its appearance modifies the real. Given that we consider the real to be what is impossible to discourse, the event of evil facilitates what was regarded as impossible in the relationships with others until the instant immediately before its occurrence. The events of evil, as with any event, possess the inexorability of the unthought-of, of the not-possible; not only do they slit individual and collective histories, thus provoking the annihilation of subjectivity, but also that annihilation suffers the impossibility of forgetting, even if forgotten through repression or foreclosure[273] evil is thus linked to trauma and the compulsion of repetition. [274]

What does it mean for evil to be an event? The event, or *événement*, as developed by post-structural philosophers, implies an unpredictable occurrence with unforeseen consequences: "it implies surprise, exposure, the unanticipatable". [275] At the same time, the event is something that befalls, that comes about. It has the curious sense of something that irrupts yet takes its time, which is of its own order of unanticipation, irruption, and change.

Derrida asks, "is saying the event possible?" because these characteristics of surprise and bewilderment occur at the same time as being inevitably displaced into a new paradigm brought about by the event.[276] Focusing on the word saying, as Derrida does at one point in his lecture, appears crucial as a discussion that will be addressed in chapter three regarding symbolisation. *Saying* in respect to the event, says Derrida, can have two paths, one as speaking—"enunciating, referring to, naming, describing, imparting knowledge, informing"; and the saying that becomes so in saying, a saying that does and enacts.[277]

The complication in saying the event, Derrida notices, is that whilst the event is entirely singular, saying the event—"saying" being a part of the language that "is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability"—misses its singularity because it comes

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[273] "Lacan introduces the term 'foreclosure' to explain the massive and global differences between psychosis and neurosis; neurosis operates by way of repression, while psychosis operates by way of foreclosure. This distinction is complemented by a third category, though arguably less secure and more problematic than the first two, of disavowal, as a mechanism specific to perversion". Russell Grigg, "From the Mechanism of Psychosis to the Universal Condition of the Symptom: On Foreclosure", in Nobus, Dany, ed.*, Key concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis,* United States of America, Other Press New York, 1999, p. 48.

[274] Mirta Goldstein, "Reflexiones sobre el mal y el trauma en los lazos sociales", in *Rev. de Psicoanálisis,* no. 4, p. 927.

[275] Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 2, p. 441.

[276] "There's one noun: "event"; an article: "the"; two verbs: "saying" and "is" (and "is" is not just any verb in just any mood); and there's an adjective: "possible." Is it "possible"? My first subject of concern had to do with the question of knowing which of these words to insist on". *Ibid.,* p. 442.

[277] *Ibid.,* p. 445.

after the event has been inscribed in the generalities of language.[278] Now, in terms of information and communication media, Derrida points to something crucial to analyse in Goldstein's argument. With the advent of technology in television, radio, and newspapers—and now social media—Derrida questions whether these instances of progress can increase the power of speech vis-à-vis the event. For the philosopher, the answer is no:

> Without dwelling on the obvious, may I remind you that this would-be saying, and even showing [*monstration*] of the event, is never, of course, commensurate with it and is never reliable a priori.[279]

On the contrary, as the ability to say and show the event increases, "so does the capacity of the technology of saying and showing to intervene, interpret, select, filter, and, consequently, to make the event happen [*faire l'événement*]".[280] The event, consequently, can only be approached in the après-coup, but the question resides in *how* it is approached. For Derrida, any critical vigilance of the modalities of saying cannot be restricted to the techniques different media have in doing so or the modes of speaking that consist in informing, reporting, relating, or describing, but in the performative aspect of saying; "in making something happen through speech".[281] This comes with its own impossibility of *making the event.*[282]

Near the end of the lecture, Derrida returns to justice. In a manner similar to the possible-impossible aporia, justice must be haunted by its opposite, perjury, for it to be justice.[283] The possibility of evil, he continues, "must be intrinsic to good or to justice for either to be possible".[284] The impossible, too, must be at the heart of the possible.[285] In a similar fashion, Goldstein finds in the possibility of evil its counterpart of good. In her words, "when the Good enjoys being and/or doing good, the Evil befalls".[286]

In order for the achieved good not to incur a corresponding evil, "the good" must necessarily stop being so—following the transformative act—and not be constituted as a dominating discourse.[287] It is because the events of evil irrupt in history, as events do, that

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[278] "This saying of the event is always somewhat problematical because the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event". *Ibid.,* p. 446.
[279] *Ibid.*, p. 447.
[280] *Loc. Cit.*
[281] *Ibid.,* pp. 447-448.
[282] *Ibid.,* p. 448.
[283] This goes in the same line as other possible-impossible haunted by their impossible possibility such as memory, the gift, hospitality, and forgiveness.
[284] *Ibid.,* p. 460.
[285] *Loc. Cit.*
[286] Goldstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 928.
[287] *Loc. Cit.*

they create fractures in the discourses of goodness, create subjective effects and construct a time's eroticism. For the psychoanalyst, these discourses are more political than moral. Goldstein develops this argument with Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas in *On the Genealogy of Morality,* where he questions whether situating good beyond any doubt or objection contains a regressive trait.[288] "What if a regressive trait lurked in 'the good man', likewise a danger, an enticement, a poison, a narcotic, so that the present lived at the expense of the future?".[289]

Tangentially to the eye-catching reference to narcotics that is part of the subject of this research—which is not without importance—, Goldstein locates Nietzsche's de-absolutisation of the Kantian proposition of good and evil as a narcotic in a similar way as Freud referred to religion as the opium of the people.[290] The striking relationship comes when the psychoanalyst analyses Nietzsche's thoughts on today's fascination with evil's violence. She sees residues in the fascination with the spectatorship of evil's violences or phenomena that are linked with an eroticism of violence "that does not allow the subject to react against what 'harms him'[291] and leaves him at the mercy of tediousness, weariness, and desperation".[292]

Likewise, Goldstein differentiates between the Real evil, "which bursts with limited violence, a local excess that supplements a specific situation", and the symbolic evil, "whose violence is spread over time thanks to the power it generates".[293] On this note, we can examine Mexico's construction of drug trafficking not only as the State's enemy but as one that could threaten the current rule of law.[294] It became symbolised and nominated as an

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[288] *Ibid.,* p. 931.
[289] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality,* New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 8
[290] Goldstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 931.
[291] Goldstein uses the phrase "le hace mal". In Spanish, the word 'mal' refers to evil, bad, and wrong. This connects the two conceptions of the word 'mal' in evil and damaging or harming.
[292] *Loc. Cit.*
[293] *Ibid.,* p. 929. "Psychoanalysis cannot evade analysing the traumatic manifestations of evil in its clinic and institutions, and differentiate the stumbling with the sexual Real of the unconscious or the traumatic roots of the subject, from the Symbolic or organised evil as a discourse whose finality is the destruction and/or cruelty of arbitrary power". *Ibid.,* p. 928.
[294] This refers to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence,* where he states regarding militarism as the compulsory, universal use of violence that has come to be as scrutinised as violence that "In it violence shows itself a function quite different from its simple application for natural ends. It consists in the use of violence as a means toward legal ends […] If that first function of violence is called lawmaking function, this second will be called law-preserving function". Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", in *Selected Writings. Volume One,* United States of America, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 241.

indivisible enemy. It became by making it happen, in saying it, as with the event, symbolically constructing a power that supposedly originated in the event of evil.

Calderón characterised drug trafficking as the country's evil by singling it out as the enemy to be combatted through any means necessary to achieve its end. The enemy became an indivisible, contoured and tangible being. Nevertheless, the arguments presented thus far and those that will be developed going forward show that organised crime in Mexico is exceedingly complex, engrained in political, economic, and social structures and articulations, and lacking in a hierarchical organisation that would embody drug trafficking and drug traffickers into a single, contained objective.

The issue of evilness is thus discursively facilitated but comes as a symbolic construction, not as an actual event. Rather, evil, the enemy, the drug traffickers, and drugs are engrained into a single-line logic through the word *narco*—as will be developed in the next section. In other words, even if these categories derived from real events, they were, according to a capitalist State discourse, translated into narratives of evil, devoid or buried behind constructed truths, and presented through totalising signifiers. This idea is not far off from Goldstein's reflections. The psychoanalyst clearly states that there are events of evil whose complexity is such that it cannot be easily addressed. Even less so, she continues, "when favouring the illusion that education or prevention can by themselves eradicate it without trespassing the difficulties stemming from fixations over the eroticism implied in the social discontent".[295]

> The events of evil appear under different forms of annihilation and cruelty. The annihilation of subjectivity uses forms of destruction and physical and/or psychic subjugation proper to murder, torture, and abuse in its diverse facets, which are constituted into traumatic events by tearing down psychic dams and consensual judgements, undoing the imaginary conditions of existence and by introducing a range of inevitability and immutability inexorable in respect to the real.[296]

It is important to note to what extent the construction of a *narco*-imaginary is done discursively. The following chapters will develop certain concepts from the previous quotation more extensively. Concepts such as subjective annihilation, trauma, and imaginary conditions of existence—as well as pending ones such as the signifier and its relation to the subject—will be developed in the final section of this chapter as we continue through the discursive productions of the *narco* and situated in the visual production of these.

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[295] Goldstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 934.
[296] *Loc. Cit.*

However, pausing momentarily on image 1 of the dead body of Arturo Beltrán Leyva, leader of the Beltrán Leyva cartel, is propitious to situate the discussion above further. In 2009, Beltrán Leyva was killed by elements of the Mexican army. Two images of Beltrán Leyva's dead body, bloodied and covered in Mexican pesos and U.S. dollar banknotes, circulated through different media. These images were staged. The soldiers undressed the shot body and placed the bank notes, rosary beads, and other personal belongings he was carrying on top him. It was almost as if he was his own crime scene, built on the *narco* aesthetic with the different objects that make up a *narco.*

Many have suspected the army's participation in that montage of the body to send a message. The defence minister denied it, but the war on drugs had begun being severely criticised. Of course, even when the media did no longer bend to the president's will—the "transition" implied a reorganisation of power and allegiances—Calderón's discourse on the war and drug trafficking plagued journalism and rumours. More than the disbelief that this—the montage of his body and the reproduction of the image—was or was not orchestrated by the government, this image and the one in colour with the bank notes covered in blood attest to the construction of the *narco* imaginary; even more, of the supposed power of the State against them.

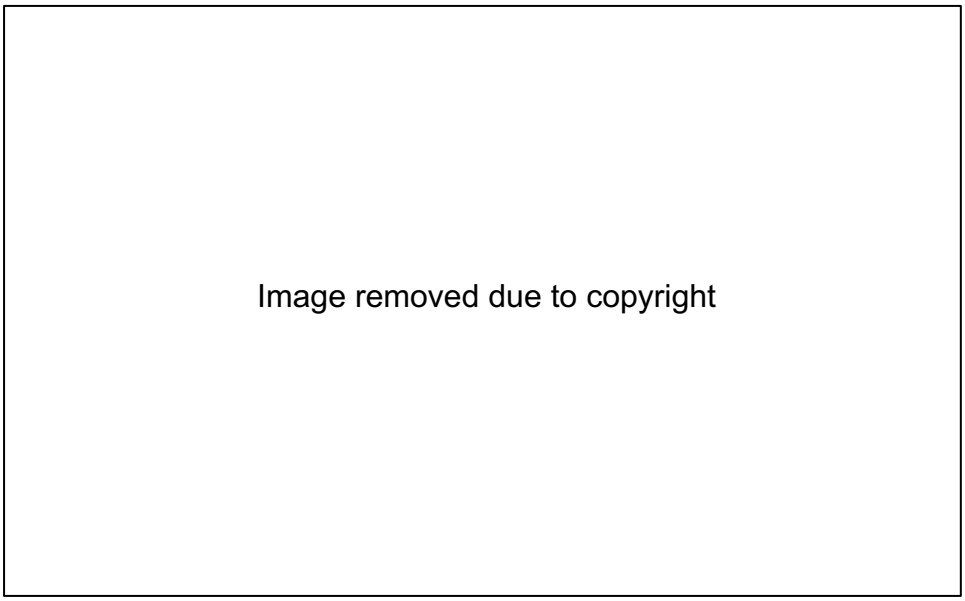


Image 1[297]

[297] Image can be found in: El Universal, "Se cumplen 10 años del operativo en que cayó Arturo Beltrán Leyva" (FROM, 12 May, 2023: https://sanluis.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/16-12-2019/se-cumplen-10-

Beltrán Leyva's death and image are among the hundreds of thousands of others that have befallen Mexico since 2006. Unlike the hundreds of other images of nameless, unknown subjects, however, this image is one of a very powerful drug lord at the time who was debased *by* the State, everyone knowing it was so. At the same time, it presented the signifiers that would eventually become fixated on deaths related to the *narco.* Zavala explains how the military operations deliberately perpetrated State violence *with* mediatic objectives. "As in the extraofficial execution of Arturo Beltrán Leyva in 2009, whose body was covered in dollar bills by the Marine soldiers that committed the operative".[298] Citing Noam Chomsky, Zavala recognises how:

> The war against drugs aimed to stimulate fear against dangerous people from whom we must protect ourselves. It is also a form of direct control of the so-called "dangerous classes", those superfluous people that do not really function in generating wealth and profit. They must be attended to in some way.[299]

One word to cover them all

As employed by communication media, words, images, language, and visuality require a receptive subject. They *are* insomuch as an audience consumes and recognises their words and images—in the sense of understanding and giving them a certain status or authority. However, increasingly since 2006 in Mexico, words and images show a constant influx of abjection, horror, violence, cruelty, and sadism. We are convened as witnesses to the otherwise unapproachable and un-nameable.

According to Peruvian poet Mario Montalbetti, the events that leave one speechless—when what appears is "language with a hole in the middle"[300]—eventually find

anos-del-operativo-en-que-cayo-arturo-beltran-leyva). The image in question is the second one in the article.

[298] Oswaldo Zavala, *La guerra en las palabras. Una historia intelectual del "narco" en México (1975-2020),* Mexico City, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, S. A. de C. V., 2022*,* p. 44.

[299] *Ibid.,* p. 45.

[300] This quotation and the section's title refer to Montalbetti's likewise titled essay where he develops signifier and signified before images of an event (the September 11 attack in the United States). He says, "On September 11, language had a great hole in the middle wherein the signified used to dispatch interpretations". Mario Montalbetti, *Cualquier hombre es una isla. Ensayos y pretextos,* Lima, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014, p. 95.

a way to organise themselves symbolically in language.[301] In Mexico, stupor and speechlessness found their way through the condensation of the unassimilable into the prefix *narco*. A slang that worked as an "instrument as much for the official powers as for the *narcomachine*".[302] This instrument is employed by one side, organised crime, just as much as by the other side, the State.

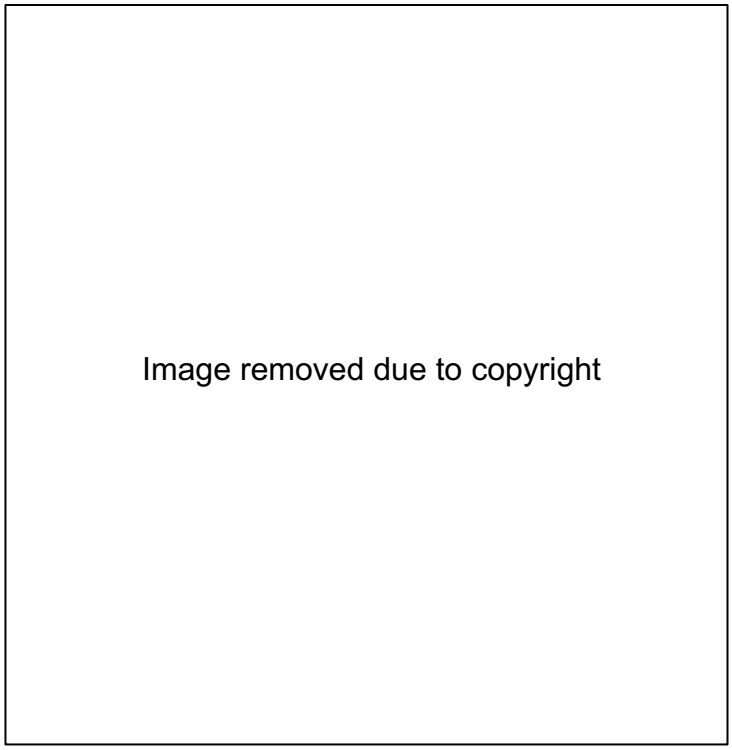
As anthropologist Rossana Reguillo argues and as has been hinted at previously, the war against drug trafficking was strengthened by two elements: "the figure of a total enemy (because the so-called 'collateral damages' did not matter), and the collapse of interpretative systems that end up producing 'good dead' and 'bad dead' in a demented dichotomy".[303] Adding, hyphenating, fusing a word with the prefix *narco-* has become a popular way of signifying everything related to do with acts, events or situations related to *narcotraffic* (drug trafficking) or organised crime operations.

This prefix has become embedded in Mexican culture, from music to aesthetics to "practices, products and concretions of culture".[304] Reguillo goes as far as naming it "narcoñol"—contracting the word *narco* and espa*ñol* (Spanish)—implying that the war on drugs has created a language just as grisly as it is popular.[305] Language and images together have constructed a wide array of neologisms, products, practices, and idioms that frame the changes in social dynamics.

In that regard, Zavala is sceptical of theories and approaches that reproduce an official state narrative. That is, he sustains that some analyses regarding narcoculture emanate "from a paradigm of representation configured a priori and spread from the power of the state".[306] Zavala thus presents a case to be made for locating the coordinates that guide and spread these cultural and social signifiers to work against them or unlearn them. Referring to an event the military performed for Calderón in 2012[307], Zavala questions the archetype of villains and enemies—in opposition to the military—that has created the

[301] Even if an event's violence belongs to the realm of the real, eventually, it will find its way into language through words; this is the symbolic register.
[302] Rossana Reguillo, "La narcomáquina y el trabajo de la violencia: Apuntes para su decodificación" (FROM, 12 October, 2018: https://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/es/e-misferica-82/reguillo).
[303] *Loc. Cit.*
[304] *Loc. Cit.*
[305] *Loc. Cit.*
[306] Zavala, Drug Cartels…, *Op. Cit.* p. 55.
[307] "In a vehicle where marijuana was presumably concealed, the soldier who played the trafficker was dressed according to his archetypal image, an image that is shown even in the [National Defense Secretariat] (SEDENA) museum dedicated to drug trafficking; cowboy boots and a sombrero, listening to narcocorridos". *Ibid.,* p. 1.

collective imaginary of the *narco*. How has the term *narco* come to be "a fearsome Pandora's box that, we believe, would unleash endless death and destruction if opened?".[308]



Title: "The narcos are powerful, and if they want to kill you, they will do it whether or not you take care of yourself".

Subtitle: "Mexico witnesses the violent increase in the new generations of drug trafficking cartels, boldened by their dominion in the country".

Under image: "Two policemen lie on the floor after being defeated in the so-called 'battle of Culiacán' in November last year (2020)".[309]

Image 2[310]

Zavala's question is fundamental not to trace an origin for the word, to search for the initial, mysterious eruption of the word as an event, but as precisely the opposite: the word does not come from an event but from a symbolic construction. Sociologist Luis Astorga's book *Mythology of the drug trafficker in Mexico,* according to Zavala, explains this contemporary symbolic construction of drug trafficking. The premise is that drug trafficking is based upon a myth whose linguistic rules and meanings—in what we call *narco*—have been constructed by the State.

[308] *Ibid.,* p. 10.
[309] Karen Pinto, "Los narcos son poderosos y si te quieren matar, lo harán te cuides o no" (FROM, 25 April, 2023: https://www.leonoticias.com/internacional/america-latina/narcos-poderosos-mexico-20200823195337-ntrc.html).
[310] Image can be found in: *Loc. Cit.*

Crucially, the matrix of this language "does not explain the actual activities of traffickers, but symbolically codifies the epistemological limits with which we involuntarily represent traffickers and the drug trade".[311] This symbolic discourse, whereby *narco* comes to mean a wide range of things—from situations to subjectivities, to aesthetics, to ways of living and dying—gives the impression of being familiar with the life and death of the *narcos* (drug-traffickers and organised crime alike), "their family relationships, their uncontrolled ambition, and their psychopathic violence".[312] This is due to a system of official representation that for decades has pretended to "reveal the cartel flowchart" but is unable to stop them.[313]

Image 2 supports Zavala's assertions as an example of the narratives by which the *narco* is Mexico's top form of evil and power. In this image, we see the disruption of daily life, witnessing simultaneously the flux of normality—cars and buses circulating—and the interruption of motion surrounding the two bodies of dead police officers in Culiacán. "The narcos are powerful, and nothing can stop them killing you if they want to", "they are emboldened by their dominion of the country", and the image depicting the bodies of two agents of the State.

Zavala's viewpoint is exemplified in this image-text. We see the dead police officers, dressed as civilians in the representation of the State, lying in a pool of blood on concrete. What we do not see, but we are supposed to place in the image, are the ghosts of the *narco* who have done this, committed this unspeakable crime, those who are making the country bleed. Eventually, these images do not need titles for us to *see* the hand of these phantasmagoric beings as the culprits of these and any other crime.

Zavala traces the discourse on the *narco* to the forever complex relationship between Mexico and the U.S.[314] This perception and symbolic incorporation does not come,

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[311] Zavala cites Astorga, stating that "The distance between the real drug traffickers and their world and the symbolic construction that we use to speak about them is so great that there seems to be no other current and feasible way than to refer to this subject in a mythological way, whose antipodes are represented by legal code and drug ballads". Astorga in Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 5.
[312] *Loc. Cit.*
[313] *Loc. Cit.*
[314] "As Waltraud Morales recalls, when US anti-drug policy replaced communism as the new doctrine of national security, the US public was already prepared to confirm the invasion of the drug cartels: a CBS survey conducted in 1988 showed that US citizens believed that the trafficking and consumption of prohibited drugs posed a greater threat to national security than terrorism or arms trafficking". *Loc. Cit.* This idea resonates with renewed proclamations on categorising Mexican *cartels* as terrorist organisations, as found in Oscar Lopez, "Alleged perpetrators of attack on four Americans dumped on Mexican street" (FROM, 10 March, 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/09/mexico-president-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-drug-cartels).

according to Zavala, from a correct understanding of drug trafficking operations, but are an "effect of the implementation of a state policy based, in part, on the conception of a permanent enemy that allows the justification of actions that would otherwise be illegal and immoral".[315]

> Faced with the permanent crisis of legitimacy at all levels of government, our leaders insist on implementing the same discursive strategy that generates the *virtual explanation* of a climate of uncontrolled violence. This explanation is nothing more than a political control of public opinion to facilitate the collective tolerance of these waves of violence that would otherwise be unacceptable.[316]

Thus, Zavala's approximation to the problem of discourse in the war on drugs, through the creation of what he recently named—perhaps ironically—in his last book, a *narconarrative*[317]*,* evidences the preponderance language has in instilling a violent regime. Zavala recognises the daily violence that leaves a trail of corpses behind it. The illegal exploitation of the country's national resources is likewise central to the State's discourse, Sustaining that the enemy is organised crime instead of local oligarchies and transnational conglomerates.[318] However, for Zavala, the drug activity discourse simultaneously disassociates official institutions from this criminal activity and generates "validity through a discursive practice that has developed its own inertia".[319] These discourses, which are self-referencing and self-reinforcing, are set in motion, leading to the official state narratives that "permeates through various fields of knowledge", including visual culture, as image 1 exemplifies.[320]

Zavala's views are provocative, thoroughly developed, and are indispensable as a critique for the symbolic and imaginary construction of the *narco* as an emblem where everything that is deemed "undisciplined, vulgar, ignorant, violent"[321] serves as a necessary yet unwanted Other. Even when he critiques other journalists and academics who reinforce the imaginary of the *narco* that stems from the "same official epistemological platform that

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[315] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 5.
[316] *Ibid.,* p. 154.
[317] "The State institutions, in Mexico and the United States, also use the 'narco' to obviate their participation in organised crime and clandestine economies of both countries. The violence is real, but the official dominating explanation is a political gimmick; a profitable phantasy that allows the authorities to exercise the cruellest violences against the population, but always legitimised by the recyclable plot of the 'war against drug trafficking'". Zavala, *La guerra en las palabras…, Op. Cit.,* p. 22.
[318] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* pp. 42-43.
[319] *Ibid.,* p. 55.
[320] *Loc. Cit.*
[321] *Ibid.,* p. 2.

configures the perception"[322], there is an argument to be made for exploring why and *how* these perceptions contribute to subjective and social changes.

That is, even when these narratives are constructed based on exploitative, violent politics from the U.S. and Mexico, given that they have already taken such hold on the Mexican and international imaginaries, a previous step to unlearning these discourses is recognising their existence in the imaginary, symbolic, and real articulations in the production of subjectivities and the social bond. Mainly because Zavala uses language[323] as a necessary condition in the ability to create not only a signifier for whatever the State wants it to be but as a proliferation of violences, its structure concerning violence and subjectivity can be developed further, mainly because linguistic production is only one face of imaginary productions.

Considering both the linguistic and the image-based constructions is crucial not only because they name new experiences and not only in how they are incorporated into discourses but also in how they shape the future. The ways of naming and seeing explain and create our relationship with our worlds. So, it can be argued that there is an urgent need to push to understand what we see and how we name it as much as un-learning those discourses, for they are creating and shifting the imaginary and symbolic basis of subjectivity and the social bond.[324]

The crucial aspect is not so much the dissemination or popularisation of these words or the easy construction of a word by adding *narco-* as a prefix but the shaping of this new "language" through its incorporation into the signifier chain. Alternatively, it is the origination of specific terms that appear to say everything because of that very prefix that falls into what Montalbetti calls the inelasticity of the signified.[325] Every word is lacking in its ability to *say*.

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[322] *Ibid.,* p. 47.

[323] "The language that we have all learned to talk about drug trafficking is deceptively clear. We all talk about the cartel, the plaza, the route, the lieutenant, the sicarios, and we get the illusion that we understand. And it is such a simple story, so attractive from a narrative point of view, that it ends up being irresistible: they killed a mayor? It was organized crime, fighting for the plaza. They killed someone running for governor? It was organized crime, fighting for the plaza. An attack against the army, against the federal police? the plaza. They killed someone running for governor? It was organized crime, fighting for the plaza. An attack against the army, against the federal police? Organized crime, fighting for the plaza. It was at a party, in a rehabilitation center, on a dirt road in the Durango sierra, in the Guerrero mountains? Organized crime, the plaza. Ciudad Juárez, Apatzingán, Teloloapan, Tantoyuca, Huejutla, Zacualpan de Amilpas? Organized crime, the plaza. A hundred dead, a thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, forty thousand? Organized crime, the route, the plaza". Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo in Zavala, *Ibid.,* pp. 57-58.

[324] Remembering that the social bond discursive structure is built on these words and messages, including and excluding the other.

[325] Montalbetti, *Op. Cit.,* p. 181.

However, in this instance, the illusion of an all-encompassing signification, further supported by visual signifiers, is directed at covering the traumatic real of the practices of violence and cruelty in the country. In short, even if these narratives are a collective lie we have agreed to, voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously, they do not make the trauma, the horror, and the fear any less real for those at whom the messages and discourses are directed.

In Mexico's context of violence, we can witness the relationship between word and image, act and representation, embodied metaphorically and literally in messages directed at a clear or amorphous Other in varied forms. One way to unravel this language, which is as much constructed as it is complex and real, can be done, for instance, in the *narcomantas* or *narcoblankets*. These are, essentially, as they have come to be adopted in our social imaginary, a piece of cloth or paper through which the *narco* sends messages to their rivals or authorities.

Rafael Saldívar and Ignacio Rodríguez argue that the *narcomantas* are the official communiqués of the *narco*, which are placed "in bridges of visible places, and many times are placed over the bodies of the victims to reinforce the threatening message of the mantas".[326] Melitón Guevara and Cruz Alberto Martínez argue that drug trafficking presents itself as an enterprise that develops its own news communication through *narcomantas* that "appear next to the bodies of murdered people to evidence their power over other groups; or in pedestrian bridges to evidence governmental corruption or to establish their position before antagonistic groups".[327]

Both positions argue the use of the *narcomanta* as a means of communication of the *narco*. Indeed, finding, reading about, or seeing a *narcomanta* means something because their use is intended to produce an effect. Following María Fernanda González's argument that the discourse that constitutes the bond is the "word directed to the other", emphasising the importance not of the *word* but to whom it is *directed*[328]*,* the message in the *narcomantas* extends far beyond the words in it, or the ones directly named in the

[326] Rafael Saldívar Arreola and Ignacio Rodríguez Sánchez, "Análisis del léxico en diferentes registros textuales en la construcción del imaginario social del narcotráfico en México", in *Literatura y Lingüística,* no. 37, p. 394.
[327] Melitón Guevara Castillo and Cruz Alberto Martínez Cruz, "Las narcomantas: vía para producir noticias en un clima de violencia", in José Miguel Túñez López and Verónica Paulina Altamirano Benítez, coords., *Comunicar desde las organizaciones. Tendencias, estrategias y casos,* Cuadernos Artesanos de Comunicación, 2015, p. 55.
[328] María Fernanda González, "La pregunta por el lazo social en el discurso del psicoanálisis. Algunas consideraciones sobre el estatuto de lo heterogéneo y la figura del asocial", in *DIFERENCIA(S) revista de teoría social contemporánea,* no. 1, p. 4.

message for that matter, such as another criminal organisation or the State. If discourse is the message that holds another message, the *narcomantas* and the whole *narcolanguage* are conforming to a social imaginary that rests on ambiguous, sometimes blatantly contradictory, messages.

On the one hand, their display and intentions are sustained both in the act and the performative aspect of the message. Because as stated by the authors above, *narcomantas* can be accompanied by dead bodies—gruesomely killed bodies, most of the time. Hence, the message is sustained *by* and located *in* the body. On the other hand, many *narcomantas*, such as the one shown in the image below, consist of a paradoxical situation of vengeance, threat, horror, and power—but also of a seeming justice.

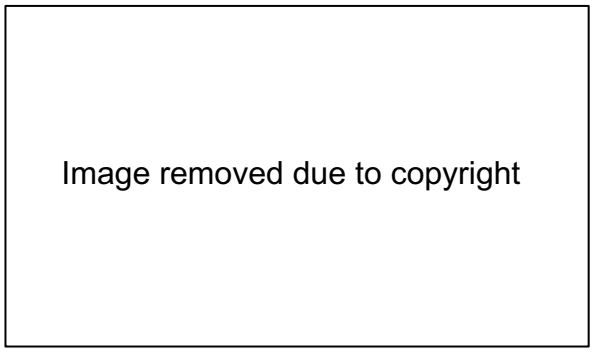

Image 3[329]

"The Sinaloa Cartel stands in solidarity with Marisela and Ruby, mother and daughter brutally murdered, and it puts at your disposal its quitapuercos (pig-removal) webpage for any information that leads to the responsible of the brutal feminicide, whether they call themselves Zetas or La Línea, and thus eradicate these beasts and scourges given that the government of the state protected them and keeps protecting them. All united against La Línea and los Zetas. Attentively, The Sinaloa Cartel".[330]

This *narcomanta,* placed at several locations in Chihuahua, comes after the murder of activist Marisela Escobedo—the mother of a murdered young woman in Ciudad Juárez in 2008. They—those who placed the blanket, allegedly the Sinaloa Cartel—offer a webpage where anyone with information can share it with the cartel. The idea of avenging will become apparent from different images throughout the chapter and will be developed further on. However, the discursive structure, as much as the content, is essential: from the solidarity with the victims to its confrontation with other cartels and the State forces that protect them to the formality of the message.

[329] Image can be found in: El Ágora, "Colocaron en Juárez y Delicias más narcomantas" (FROM, 21 January, 2023: http://www.elagora.com.mx/Colocaron-en-Juarez-y-Delicias-mas.html).
[330] *Loc. Cit.*

What message(s) does it send, and to whom? What bond is it establishing? All the noticeable elements in the *mise-en-scène* are essential: the configuration of the *manta* (the material, handwriting or typing, the colour), the content itself and its location and placement. However, another equally noticeable element is the reach that it may have—distributed as an image—and its reception in the population. In other words, the manta's signifiers, both in its configuration over time and its singularity. Of course, there is a difference marked by those who see the *narcomantas* directly, maybe even along with the bodies who commonly accompany them and others who only see it in images. Its meaning and experience may not be the same[331]. However, the uses of the *mantas* have been deployed so that their appearance works as a metonymy, i.e., the appearance of a *manta* is the appearance of the *narco* itself.[332]

The blanket, paper, and cardboard are no longer innocuous elements, as they are never without a sentence in both meanings: the trace of death and the promise of more. In some cases, the *narcomanta* signals and marks, in a macabre way, the dominion over the excess, the incommensurability of the broken body and its containment in a message. It implies a politics of horror played socially and subjectively through political and economic interests.

The previous idea warrants a detour into the signifier and other units of language that, in turn, form part of the subject's constitution. Lacan re-developed the concept of signifier based on Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson's developments of language as a system of signifiers.[333] Oscar Masotta explains how it predominantly departed and transformed Saussure's conception of the two faces of the 'sign': the signifier and the signified.

Whilst Saussure proposes that signifier (the acoustic image) and signified (concept) depend on each other for the determination of meaning, for Lacan, these do not correlate. On the contrary, Lacan establishes that the signifier prevails over the signified and produces

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[331] Naturally, it bears recognising the singularity of experience in places primarily occupied by different cartels or amid excessive violence, as opposed to those where this occurrence is more exceptional—such as Mexico City. However, this project explores the more abstract or flawed concept—State-wide experience.

[332] It is crucial to mention that the *appearance* of the *narco* is complex. It represents the game of invisibilities and visibilities, showing and hiding, present in the visuality of violence in Mexico and the exclusion and marginalisation of subjects and groups. Organised crime, by nature, operates in the shadows, out of the margins of legality and society. However, it presents itself through expressions of cruelty as if pointing to that haunting quality of horror through a spectacular rite.

[333] Aydan Gülerce, "Invitation: Revisioning Psychoanalysis (The Un/limited Un/conscious)", in Aydan Gülerce, ed., *Re(con)figuring Psychoanalysis Critical Juxtapositions of the Philosophical, the Sociohistorical and the Political*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 21.

a meaning only when it comes in connection with other signifiers.[334] Lacan's initial conception of the unconscious is that it is made from signifiers that, when combined with other linguistic tropes, such as metaphor and metonymy, they organise the role of language in the famously coined phrase "the unconscious is structured like a language".[335]

> What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have-precisely insofar as I share its language [langue] with other subjects, that is, insofar as this language [langue] exists-to use it to signify something altogether different from what it says. This is a function of speech that is more worthy of being pointed out than that of disguising the subject's thought (which is usually indefinable)-namely, the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for truth.[336]

As reminded by Goldstein, the subject for Lacan is housed between two signifiers.[337] More specifically, "a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier". Herein comes another Lacanian maxim that the subject is divided because "no signifiers ever exactly denote who the subject is, and subjectivity is to be found only in the scattered diversity of signifiers".[338] The production of subjectivity will be developed in more depth in the next chapter; however, it is crucial to stress the importance of the signifier in the production of the subject, for it is the subject, in the encounter with words and images, and [visual] signifiers, that is of interest for this research question.

Montalbetti eloquently develops the Lacanian signifier as "a sensory mark (or its trace) that has two properties: (a) produces no signified and (b) produced an (effect of) signified".[339] The first property, he says, ensures that a signifier is not a signified, and the second, that it nevertheless produces a signified. Significantly for this project, Montalbetti sustains that it is crucial to understand if the signifier is producing the effect of a signified or if the signified is producing an effect of a signifier. This, according to Montalbetti, alerts to the condition of the time—the first a predominantly verbal one and the second a visual one.

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[334] Marta López García*,* Alice *after Lacan: The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real* (thesis), Valladolid, Universidad de Valladolid, 2021, p. 14.
[335] Stijn Vanheule and Abe Geldhof, "Knotted Subjectivity: On Lacan's Use of Knot Theory in Building a Non-universal Theory of the Subject", in Aydan Gülerce, ed., *Re(con)figuring Psychoanalysis Critical Juxtapositions of the Philosophical, the Sociohistorical and the Political*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 115.
[336] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: the first complete edition in English,* New York, 2006, p. 505-506.
[337] Goldstein, Reflexiones sobre el mal…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 926.
[338] "Some signifiers are embraced and give shape to identification and to identity; others are repressed and give rise to symptom formation", Vanhuele and Geldhof, *Op. Cit.,* p. 115.
[339] Montalbetti, *Op. Cit.*, p. 178.

In this logic, the poet differentiates not between words and images—mere nouns—but between seeing and reading.

This argument reads similarly to Didi-Huberman's ponderings when stating that images do not inherently say something. Instead, we must read them, analyse them, and decompose them to distance them from the "linguistic clichés" that arise as "visual clichés".[340] So, when Montalbetti notes that the signifier is a promise of a signified (meaning), a Derridean perspective would suggest that this promise, always to-come, would be a deferred time—much like his concept of différance.[341] Essentially, the premise states that if the signifier "has no time or space to elaborate itself and is quickly caught by the signified, thought becomes impossible".[342]

An additional proposition made by Nelly Richard expresses that "the lack of distance and profundity that the production of this semiotic reverberation of codes that are diluted in pure effects of superficiality indicate that the imaginary has triumphed over the symbolic".[343] Montalbetti argued something similar when addressing the dissemination of images following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. He suggests that, at first, these were free and disconnected visual signifiers for which the audience received no interpretation—or signified. Eventually, he says, the signified arrived, and it did so virulently, through a Manichaeism explaining who are the good and how are the evil.[344]

Returning to the umbrella term that the word *narco* has become, coupled with the *nota roja's* tradition of spectacularising violence and death, we begin seeing the dominating and defining signifiers of Mexican visual culture. However, these cannot be traced back to an origin. The word *narco* is not located at the origin of violence in Mexico but has become so to the point where the word stands for the violence of all violences.

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[340] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Cuando las imágenes toman posición: El ojo de la historia,1,* Madrid, A. Machado Libros, 2008, p. 44.

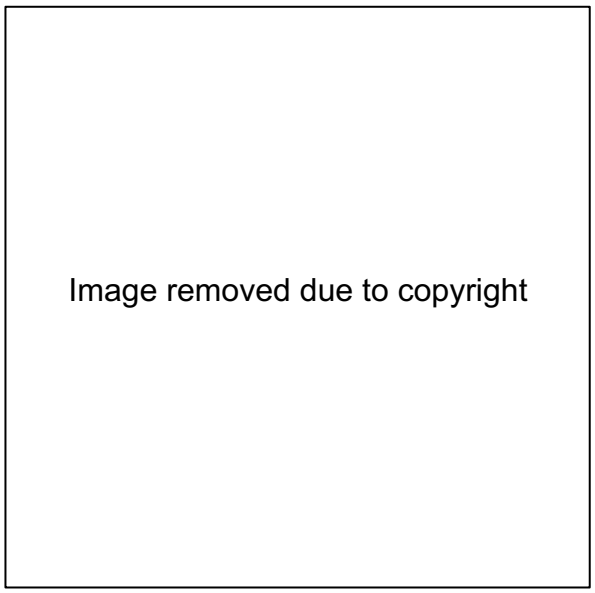
[341] Derrida's construction of the term différance comes from combining the words "difference" and "deferral" in French. The introduction of the letter *a*, which is not pronounced differently from the *e* in French, implies that the distinction is recognised only in writing. Derrida created this term to challenge traditional Western thinking that favours speech over writing. The *a* disrupts the idea of presence and complete intelligibility of a word and argues that meaning is located in an infinite chain of meanings.

[342] Montalbetti, *Op. Cit.*, 179-181.

[343] This argument is based on the thoughts of postmodern theorists who have stated "that reality today is parodically self-commented as an image of images, after determining the dissolution of the referent (the body of the real) that—modernistically—guided the activity of representation. The referent—the reality—is increasingly dissipated until it is lost in the sign chains that are mimetically melted together until they produce a complete levelling of signifiers and signifieds". Nelly Richard, *Fracturas de la memoria. Arte y pensamiento crítico,* Argentina, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2007, pp. 101-102.

[344] Montalbetti, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 94-95.

Words are rearticulated, reinvested, or repurposed; the same goes for the images. The question arises: what is located in that deferred time between the signifier and the signified? Are Mexican images of violence visual signifiers awaiting the promise of a signified? Or, conversely, are they signifieds not finding a place in the signifying chain? Or are they neither, and our experience of them defies our contemporary [available] language and structures?



"Two 'narcocadavers' are hanged from a bridge in Cuernavaca".[345]

Image 4[346]

These questions are central to the research and will be sustained in their interrogative form. One way to address the question of signifier or signified in and of the image and the subject formation in a context of violence—and dominating discourses—is considering it in the interstices of ambivalences constitutive to the State's strategy of employing the word *narco* as an overloaded yet vacuous signifier. Importantly, it has been visually articulated to determine something instinctively in the crucial imaginary conception of the subject. This is *something* that creates fear and terror through the horror of these images.

[345] El Mundo, "Cuelgan de un puente dos 'narcocadáveres' en Cuernavaca" (FROM, 25 April, 2023: https://www.elmundo.es/america/2010/04/09/mexico/1270837333.html).
[346] Image can be found in: *Loc. Cit.*

The production of images of violence in Mexico, such as image 4, shows the ambivalent, yet intentional, use of the prefix *narco*. In many instances, the descriptions ranging from "narcocadaver found" to "bodies are left with a message by narco" occlude the real position of the *narco*. It is only until reading the complete article that the extent to which the titles are misleading or unclear becomes apparent due to the obfuscation on whether the *narco* perpetrated the acts, if the victims are members of a cartel, or if they are others caught in a struggle or 'score-settling' between cartels.[347]

Contradictory processes operate through this visual production—that, at the same time, is conducive to the production of horror and terror. On the one hand, many arguments have stated that continuous exposure to these types of images creates an adequation or even—however ineffectively the term is employed—a normalisation of not only images of violence but of violence itself. On the other hand, as will be developed in the following chapters, there is an underlying current of fear and even terror of living in the country—and the most feared actor is the *narco*.

Thinking with images of violence and the words and signifiers, or *signifieds*, that frame them means analysing them to understand the effects of their discursive production. Thus, the question is not merely, "is fear instilled or spread by a certain type of image and its textual referent?". This would entail an objective or objectified psychic time or organisation. It goes further than gathering nouns as verbs and verbs as nouns under the umbrella of an image of violence. It is not only the fear of violence—even of a specific type of violence—that we associate with an actor but the actor himself that we see behind the image, however imaginary. This actor includes all the marginal and abject subjectivities—that will be addressed in the following chapters—that are [potentially] violent or evil. It is not only fear but paranoia, distrust, and discrimination of the other.

Hence, there likely is something between the interstices or on the margins of the image and the word that constitutes the capacity to spread horror, fear, or other affects that could enable the state's discourse regarding organised crime. Taking again image 4 with the two vertically hanging bodies, the horizontal lines of the bridge are the only referent for the upward limit for the image, from where we place the imaginary beginning of the rope. The head on the body on the left, which seems to be covered with a bag, noting the absence of faces, is magnified and distorted in the shadows behind it. The head appears to be severed from the body, differently than will be addressed in the following chapter, through

[347] Discerning the actors involved in the production of violence and its images is one of Mexico's most complex questions and not one that this project aims to answer.

the partial nakedness of his body and the perspective of the beams at the height of the shoulder and the bag placed over his head.

Image 2 shows the opposite, the gravity of the bodies when dead, the blood. There is an eeriness to image 4, almost as if the bodies were hanged and adjusted on purpose. Indeed, this could be only a matter of the perspective and framing of the image, but this is where the heart of the question lies, not focusing on the intention but on the result as an image. Thus, the image shows, simultaneously, a body that could belong to many dark-skinned young men in Mexico and a faceless head projected less as a human face and more as a set of folds resembling the shape of the severed head made to be anything in the blackness of the bag and the shadow. Conversely, image 2 portrays the unquestionable certainty of two dead bodies lying over their own blood. Images 2 and 4 alternate between certainty and uncertainty: knowing what our eyes are seeing, as image 2 suggests, and the sense, or suspicion, that we cannot fully comprehend them, as image 4 insinuates.

What joins these images here, in the grid of violence, of images of a kind, is the allusion and reiteration to the *narco.* The *narco* signifier is bonding and framing two images, differing aesthetically, contextually, and geographically. A *narco-narrative, following* Zavala's argument, can be seen in the effects and possible knowledge they are producing, the narratives framing the war on drugs in Mexico. Nevertheless, from another perspective, the idea of *a* narrative is insufficient as it is to assume that the images say only one thing. The signifier *narco* may be all-encompassing and purposefully fit to englobe these and many images. However, the question arises whether a 'signifier'—still debating if *narco* can be one or is more a signified—can be a ground where anything fits, especially when made as an image with its own array of complexities and logic.

Chapter three: the real of horror and the horror of the real in the context of violence and cruelty in Mexico

> Este país tendrá que aprender más por sus muertos que por sus vivos.
>
> This country will have more to learn from its dead than from its living.
> —Elmer Mendoza[348]

The last chapter ended by questioning how the signifier *narco* has encompassed various situations, activities, people, aesthetics, and other social and cultural occurrences. These occurrences are grouped—whether through Zavala's perspective or others such as Reguillo's or Segato's—in discursive practices that shape subjectivity and the social bond. This chapter will continue the discussion on evilness, the signifier *narco,* as well as other signifiers and discursive practices in Mexico, to ponder the emergence of the *Real* of horror in images of violence.

This chapter aims to understand if, and if so, how, the appearance of images of violence and language's failures or impossibilities in grounding them symbolically to make sense of them singularly and collectively can affect subjectivity and the social bond. This comes from the premise, that will be the centre of this chapter, that the violence *in* and *of* language, coupled with the emergence of the real in visuality that was later captured by discourse and reduced into *signifieds*, can generate subjective positionings—namely trauma, repression, melancholy, and *jouissance,* amongst others—that are then translated into porous, volatile, or unstable social bonds.

Referring to Tuñón's ideas discussed in chapter two, the issue of the viewing subject returns. Citing John Berger, who said, "what we know or what we believe affects the way in which we see things", Tuñón ventures that we see what we are predisposed to see; we see

[348] Elmer Mendoza, "Cada vez que veo un mapa de México se me antoja pintarlo de negro", in Medina, Cuauhtémoc, ed., *¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?,* Mexico City, Editorial RM, S. A. de C. V., 2009, p. 112.

what we can perceive.[349] The questions concerning the subject and subjective positions in seeing arise from and for this statement. What does it mean not only to [constantly] see images of violence in Mexico, but what are the subjective conditions that allow us to see, consume, and live with images of violence? How does this impact our relationship with the other(s)?

The violent visual shift is not passive or naïve, nor has it followed an innocent and blameless progression, for power has ensured this path for visuality. As with the words and even the 'language' argued to have been created around the *narco, as* explained in the previous chapter, discursive productions do not happen spontaneously and are subject to power dynamics that create subjective and social orders. Thus, not only does the question turn to what surfaces, subjectively, from the encounter with these images, but what subjective traits allow these images to take hold of our visual range.

Hence, the first chapter and the interlude's discussion warranted their inclusion in this text to examine the role that the images from the historical periods referred to have had in how we see today's ones. Furthermore, they were necessary to trace that *something*, those appearances, not in the least disconnected from today's social, cultural, and political realities, signalling that something happened and continues stemming even from that time. As much as the development of the *nota roja* since the nineteenth century has become a way of seeing and framing upon which other media have leant, contemporary visual culture stands on bricks of many ways of seeing—some of which I attempt to trace in the project.

There are two reasons that the gestures of showing and hiding, suggesting whilst concealing, and obscuring through provoking are at the centre of this chapter. The first is the nature of psychic operations, whereby not every impression or perception is made conscious, nor does unconsciousness neglect to affect subjectivity. The second refers to the extremes that cohabitate and create complex dynamics in Mexico. Power, as explained by Pilar Calveiro, "shows, hides and reveals itself both in what it shows and in what it hides".[350]

Thus, subjectivity is one of this chapter's central themes, and it will be approached throughout different sections to facilitate its understanding; the same stands for the social bond. The theoretical approaches to subjectivity and the social bond will be complemented with images that demand seeing beyond the signifiers that frame them in the media, that require thinking with them and putting them into words, and that can move from the

[349] Tuñón, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 45-46.
[350] Pilar Calveiro, *Poder y desaparición: los campos de concentración en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Colihue, 2004, p. 14.

imaginary into the symbolic. I will first situate the problem of subjectivity and the social bond in Mexico as a condition of extremes and then address the Lacanian registers and the constitution of subjectivity and the social bond. Further on, these will be regarded from the perspective of abjection, horror, and fear. Visuality and necropolitics will be developed in chapter four.

Hiding and showing: how violence lies in the extremes

Violence in Mexico dwells in extremes: at the same time and alternatively, violences are veiled and|or exposed to their most raw and abject reality. Reguillo argues that the symbolic devices present in Mexican culture that have served to "process" violences have primarily been those of remoteness and exceptionality. However, the reality in Mexico has evidenced the short-sightedness of these logics.[351] Trying to unravel the logics of remoteness and exceptionality exemplifies the dichotomous oppositions between which the problem of war and violence in Mexico tends to rest.

Whilst Reguillo differs from Zavala in their appreciation of the capacity of state versus organised crime, the two nevertheless present indispensable arguments for this chapter. Considering violence as a problem exterior to society as if we had absolutely nothing to do with its increase and consequential decay, Reguillo continues, sustains, enabled, on the one hand, the normalisation of those violences, and, on the other, the aestheticisation of brutal violences. Reguillo states that we tend to think of others as the guilty ones and that this is an "anthropological amulet" that serves to "exorcise the body of a community torn by violence and cruelty".[352] However, Reguillo continues, "there is no exteriority in those violences, and they do not arise out of nowhere: they nest and grow through structural, subjective and symbolic factors".[353] The depth of this last quotation will be developed further on through the three Lacanian registers.

As has been mentioned before, Mexico has become prolific and cruelly creative in the ways of giving death. The practices of giving death and coming to understand the manner in which the dead bodies are found as a metonymy for what they are has been

[351] Rossana Reguillo, *Necromáquina. Cuando morir no es suficiente,* Guadalajara, ITESO, 2021, p. 33.
[352] *Ibid.,* p. 133.
[353] *Loc. Cit.*

approached through neologisms that, as mentioned earlier with Reguillo, have created a language with which Mexicans have become familiar; these neologisms "trivialise a painful reality".[354] Some of the words to describe the bodies—many of which have images attached to them—are *desollados* (skinned), *decapitados* (decapitated), *mutilados* (mutilated), *desmembrados* (dismembered), *quemados* (burned), *colgados* (hanged), *embolsados* (bagged), and *encobijados* (wrapped in blankets).

Without being able to delve into individual or groups' drives, motivations, or significations behind their acts[355] and staging of the bodies of the people they kill, we can only rely on what their visual production can tell us. One of these impressions is that death can be delivered through wildly different mediums yet converge in practices of horror and cruelty. I will discuss these two extremes through images of *encobijados* (bodies wrapped in blankets) and *embolsados* (bodies placed in bags) on one end and decapitations on the other.

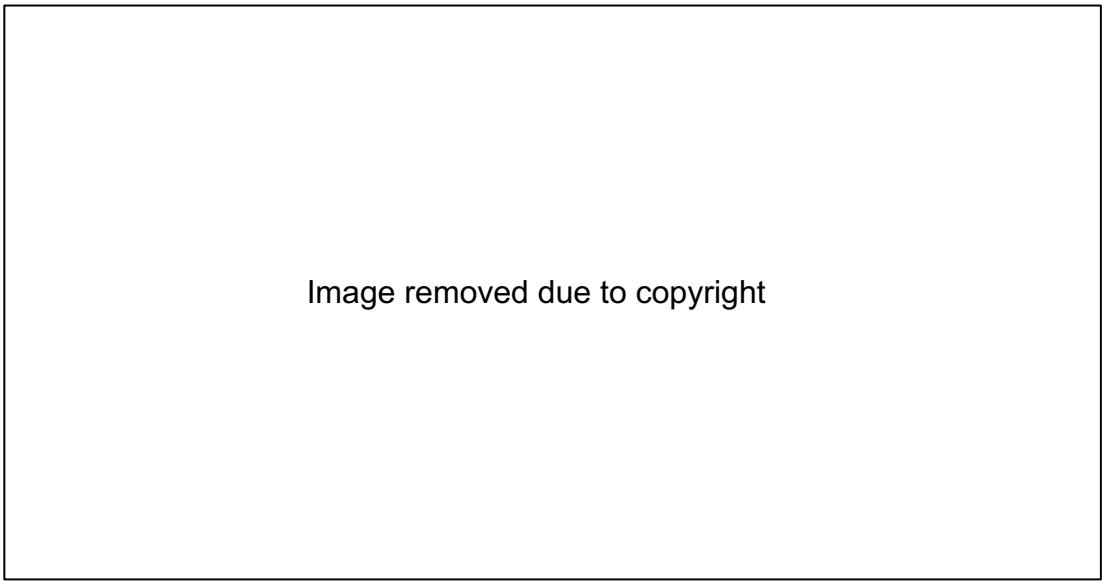


Image 1[356]

[354] Lilian Paola Ovalle, "Imágenes abyectas e invisibilidad de las víctimas. Narrativas visuales de la violencia en México", in *El Cotidiano,* no. 164, p. 104.
[355] Nor the fact that no knowledge or documentation could attest to either a subject or group favouring one or other practice, and consequently cannot establish a systematicity of a single practice of giving death and staging the hanged, decapitated, dismembered, or wrapped bodies.
[356] Image can be found in: Edmundo Velázquez, "Hallan cadáver de un hombre encobijado en Puebla capital" (FROM, 3 January, 2020: https://www.periodicocentral.mx/2017/pagina-negra/tragedias/item/21111-abandonan-cadaver-de-un-hombre-encobijado-en-la-colonia-san-luis-gonzaga#ixzz6ASMOXR98).

Image 1 reveals layers. On its surface are veils that, on the one hand, hide the horror whilst, on the other, they disseminate it. Taken in 2017, in the state of Puebla, a "cadaver was reported by neighbours, who originally thought it was a man sleeping in the place".[357] Unmistakably, the image shows a body: the bare feet standing out from the blanket and a portion of black hair, noticeable on the part of the head. At first sight, the image could depict someone sleeping, tucked in a blanket. There is nothing on or around the blanket that tells otherwise. However, a second glance at the photograph reveals something ominous about the body's position and the blanket on top.

There is, as Calveiro suggests, something in the interior and on the exterior that hides and shows. The interior is hidden yet sufficiently visibilised to suggest an eeriness that a person sleeping does not. The ground does not invoke a hospitable scenery, with dry grass covered in branches and flanked by withered weeds. A blurred yellow line cuts through the image. It is evidently a police cordon that delimits the scene, declares the crime, and circumscribes its limits. The blurred yellow does not trace the body but emphasizes the ground and the lifeless body's gravity.

Within the blanket, we know there is a body that cannot be seen but can be imagined. A dead man, bound by the neck and feet, with "signs of blows to the face".[358] The article does not mention anything of the man's life, not his name, his age, his identity or some narrative portrayal of this life and death beyond the apparent facts. As was established in the previous chapter, these images are usually conveyed with neologisms (*encobijado* in this case), but also with a certain detachment where the involuntarily portrayed bodies are adjectivised as a "lump", "package", or "cadaver". These words and neologisms are elements of the discourses that produce horror.

An ominous, eerie state of indeterminacy can place the subject both as dead and alive, maybe sleeping, not knowing which. Then, when proven to be the first, someone dead, the lack of naming, identification, or explanation carries another sentence. Horror can present itself even when covered with blankets in what is a paradoxical act of care. The *encobijados* are bodies that "are 'delivered'—paradoxically—in blankets or covers that are meant to protect".[359] These blankets, especially the type of blanket shown in image 1, are objects of significance in Mexican culture; they proffer shelter and rest, containment, and

[357] *Loc. Cit.*
[358] *Loc. Cit.*
[359] Reguillo, La narcomáquina y el trabajo de la violencia*, Op. Cit.,* n.p.

care. Later, they began being used to wrap and dispose of bodies, enunciating that no one can sleep peacefully, there is no rest, no safe place, and nowhere to hide.

The paradox of the *encobijamiento* is particularly conspicuous when compared with the *embolsados.* The *embolsados* are "bodies that are 'delivered' in black bags, for garbage".[360] The *bagged* bodies, as well as the *encobijados*, may or may not be complete, may or may not be dismembered, may show signs of torture, be tied with ropes or tape, or simply covering fragments of the body. However, they share the effort in containing and concealing either the body or the crime.

Whilst images of violence have changed throughout the years regarding the discourses, signifiers, and signifieds they can or cannot enable, they have created coordinates of violence and terror in the Mexican [imaginary] topography. To expand on the subjective and social effects these can have, I will develop these concepts alongside the extremes mentioned through images of *encobijados* and *embolsados* and decapitations. Hereafter, I will develop three registers in Lacanian theory and their predominance in the construction of subjectivity, located in their articulation. Later, these will be considered in their relationship with images of violence in the emergence of horror and the constitution of fear as a dominant subjective trait.

To explain different psychic operations, Lacan, based mainly on Freud's thoughts, developed three registers: the imaginary, symbolic, and real. As its name suggests, the imaginary register relates to the image, to images.[361] Initially, in the 1950s, Lacan developed his theories on the subject through the structuring role of language. The word, says Lacan, is a gift of language: "and language is not immaterial. It is subtle matter, but matter nonetheless".[362] Language is the primary symbolic activity. He developed the notion of the unconscious made up of signifiers that combined into metaphors and metonymies as part of the Symbolic system: "that is, language and the internal structure of speech – determines mental functioning".[363]

As a side note regarding representation, it is essential to note that for Freud, the linguistic structure of the psychic apparatus does not refer exclusively to words, as will be explained below with the imaginary. According to María Luciana Yacuzzi, there are two

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[360] *Loc. Cit.*
[361] The jouissance, or enjoyment, occurs in the imaginary register.
[362] Jacques Lacan and Wladimir Granoff, "Fetichism: the symbolic, the imaginary and the real", in Lorand, P. and Balint, M. (eds) *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*. New York, New York Random House, 1956, p. 3.
[363] Vanheule and Geldhof, *Op. Cit.,* p. 115.

types of representation for Freud: of object and word. The word-presentation, she continues, is a closed series and combines auditive, visual and kinetic components that correspond to the sonorous image, the visual image of the written word (print letter) or the motor image of speech and handwriting. The object presentation or association is, conversely, open and combines visual, olfactive, auditive, and tactile images. Thus, in Freud, the word-presentation has an organiser and structural role reliant on auditive images, and the thing-presentation rests on a visual component.[364]

At this point in Lacan's theories, he considered subjectivity a pure effect of speech. Hence, the maxim mentioned earlier on which a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier.[365] For Stijn Vanheule and Abe Geldhof, this is a radical conception of the subject, for "it implies that the subject is not a mental instance or a 'being' that has any reality beyond language, but a strict effect of symbolic articulation".[366] This is also his first development of the concept, or signifier, known as Name-of-the-Father which represents the law for the subject. That is, the Name-of-the-Father grounds the subject in rules and standards that they must obey "to make sense of desire and it helps them to experience permanency in social relations".[367]

During his 1950s development of the symbolic system, the Name-of-the-Father signifier was crucial for its possibility of consistently articulating the subject. If the instalment of the signifier in the symbolic register fails, according to Vanheule and Geldhof, the articulation of the subject would become chaotic, which is the ground for psychosis in which delusion serves as a stabilisation of the subject. Thus, at this point, the acquisition, or failure, of the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father leads to either entering "the world of shared neurotic convention" or ending up in psychosis "which prevents them from participating in the world of convention".[368]

Further on in developing the three registers and subjectivity, Lacan shifts his original propositions. He concludes that the symbolic cannot fully explain subjectivity. Following Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive, Lacan introduces the concept of *jouissance* "as a mode of satisfaction or drive gratification that is beyond pleasure and should be thought

[364] María Luciana Yacuzzi, "El concepto de representación en psicoanálisis: algunas notas para su abordaje", IX Congreso Internacional de Investigación y Práctica Profesional en Psicología XXIV Jornadas de Investigación XIII Encuentro de Investigadores en Psicología del MERCOSUR. Facultad de Psicología - Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, p. 837.
[365] Vanhuele and Geldhof, *Op. Cit.,* p. 115.
[366] *Loc. Cit*.
[367] *Ibid.,* p. 116.
[368] *Loc. Cit.*

of as dialectically opposed to the Symbolic".[369] Because *jouissance* is beyond, or in opposition, to the symbolic, and thus resists signification, Lacan introduces the concept of the Real "against which the Symbolic collides".[370]

> An important concept that Lacan introduced during this period is the object *a*. The object *a* denotes the element of corporeal *jouissance* that, despite all dialectical tension, cannot be inserted into the order of the Symbolic. Lacan (1960) says that it is in relation to such an object that the subject, which is still conceptualized as an effect of the signifier, takes shape. More specifically, in the subject's relation to the orifices of the body such as the oral, anal, scopic and invocative registers, objects a can be found.[371]

Consequently, Lacan situates the cause for desire in the subject as a formation based on the *objet (petit) a,* or object *a,* and, interestingly, in the failure of the symbolic. In other words, the Real for the subject—where that which 'does not work' resides—sets the symbolic in motion.[372] With this shift, Vanheule and Geldhof note that Lacan's development on the unconscious and the symbolic—through the Name-of-the-Father signifier—changes. Notably, with the proposition of the Real, Lacan no longer considers that everything in the unconscious could be interpreted, neither by metaphor nor metonymy. The "Real unconscious" is not open to interpretation.[373]

The Name-of-the-Father, in this instance, in relation to the object *a,* becomes more of an orientating function than a determinant in subjective formations.[374] Eventually, in the 1970s, as Vanheule and Geldhof explain, Lacan develops the mathematical knots concerning the RSI registers as both a model and reflection of their articulation. He moves towards considering the registers as non-hierarchical knotting of the registers as circles, withdrawing the previous predominance of the symbolic.[375]

> This viewpoint is important in that it implies a further step away from a purely signified model of subjectivity. In the Borromean model the subject is no longer seen as a mere effect of references between signifiers in the Symbolic, but as a production within S that only comes to the fore because R, S and I are linked. His point then is that the link between the three registers is the support of the

[369] *Loc. Cit.*
[370] *Loc. Cit.*
[371] *Ibid.,* pp. 116-117.
[372] *Ibid.,* p. 117.
[373] *Loc. Cit.*
[374] It guides how the subject will relate to their desire in relation to the object *a.*
[375] *Ibid.,* p. 120.

> subject (Lacan, 1975–76, pp. 50, 53), meaning that the connection between R, S and I makes up the condition for a subject to appear in the Symbolic.[376]

The importance of subjective formation at this stage is not connected to the law as the external incorporation of the Name-of-the-Father but is connected to how singularity shapes the knot. The object *a* is constituted within the knotting of the three registers, not only with the symbolic and the real. In the same manner as the initial conception of the symbolic underwent further and significant developments, the Imaginary register likewise observed changes and revisions from the initial hypotheses, culminating in its incorporation into the Borromean knot.

The imaginary is, first, the subject's encounter with the world. For this encounter to happen and the ego to find itself, according to Licitra Rosa *et al.*, there needs to be some identification.[377] For Lacan, as John Shannon Hendrix explains, "the imaginary (*imaginaire*) refers to perceived or imagined images in conscious and unconscious thought, sensible and intelligible forms; picture thinking (Vorstellung), dream images or manifest content, and conscious ego in discursive thought".[378] Initially, Lacan considered the imaginary register in direct opposition to the symbolic—opposing image and speech. Later, the imaginary was subordinated to the symbolic.[379] This is evident in Lacan and Wladimir Granoff's assertions in 1956 in *Fetichism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real* stating that the imaginary is only decipherable when rendered into symbols.[380]

However, to understand not only Lacan's conception of the imaginary and vision but also the preponderance he gives to the gaze, his cavillations from the 1960s onwards are significant. As noted by Licitra Rosa *et al.* in the 1964 seminar, Lacan suggests that "the visual becomes a sign of the emergence of a real that is irreducible to both reality and the mediation of the subject of knowledge".[381] There is, they continue, a split that separates reality from the real, which is produced in the visual field: "which is, on the one hand, the

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[376] *Ibid.,* p. 121.
[377] This first identification is presented in the mirror stage where "prior to the formation of the discourse of the demand, the imaginary structures the identification of the self based on an interaction between the self and an external other, which is symbiotically attached to the narcissistic body". Licitra Rosa, Carmelo *et al.,* "From the Imaginary to Theory of the Gaze in Lacan", in *Frontiers in Psychology,* vol. 12, p. 1. Whilst the mirror stage is inextricable from the Imaginary in Lacanian theory, this project will not delve into it due to the time and space needed for other concepts and analyses.
[378] John Shannon Hendrix, "The Imaginary and Symbolic of Jacques Lacan" (FROM, 31 March, 2023: https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=saahp_fp).
[379] Licitra Rosa *et al., Op. Cit.,* p. 2.
[380] Lacan and Granoff, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.
[381] Licitra Rosa *et al., Op. Cit.,* p. 1.

cardinal principle of the consistency of the experience of reality (as imaginary), and on the other, it is an element of irreducibility to reality (as object gaze)".[382]

In Freud's work on fetichism, Stuart Hall notes how the "substantiated presence of a foregrounded image or object becomes the repository of profoundly displaced feelings and unresolved emotions which cannot, other than indirectly, find expression".[383] This is what was recaptured by Lacan as scopophilia, or scopic drive. From the 1960s and 1970s, Lacan insisted on the theme of the gaze and significantly developed the scopic drive. The gaze, as a structure of its own, in opposition to the other drives, "shows the relationship of conjunction/disjunction between the drive and the imaginary body".[384] Since Lacan regularly revisits Freud's concepts and builds on them, this led Lacan to assert that the gaze imposes a modification in the presentation of the imaginary.[385] In Seminar XI, Lacan states that:

> After *making oneself seen*, I will introduce another, *making oneself heard*, of which Freud says nothing. I must, very quickly, point out to you the difference between *making oneself heard* and *making oneself seen*. In the field of the unconscious the ears are the only orifice that cannot be closed. Whereas *making oneself seen* is indicated by an arrow that really comes back towards the subject, *making oneself heard* goes towards the other. The reason for this is a structural one.[386]

Even if evident, it is essential to remark that the gaze is not the eye, or not in the eye, as an organ. Licitra Rosa *et al.* pose this observation through the question of what would be the gaze if I am the one seeing and being seen, as happens in the mirror. Something is beyond the organ, as in the world, "there is something to look at before there is a sight to see".[387] Thus, looking is being looked at: "the eye is on the spectator and the 'spectated'".[388] Lacan's turn, according to Raquel Z. de Goldstein, is that the traditional optical diagram of vision is no longer operative because what is seen sees.[389] Not only does the image require a subject to see, but the subject is also seen through or in them.

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[382] *Loc. Cit.*
[383] Stuart Hall, "Introduction", in Evans, Jessica, Hall, Stuart, eds., *visual culture: the reader,* London, SAGE publications, 1999, p. 312.
[384] Licitra Rosa *et al., Op. Cit.,* p. 2.
[385] *Ibid.,* p. 2.
[386] Jacques Lacan, *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (Book XI), New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1981, p. 195.
[387] Licitra Rosa *et al., Op. Cit.,* p. 3.
[388] Raquel Z. de Goldstein, "¿Por qué Lacan?", in *Revista de Psicoanálisis,* LXVI, 4, p. 693.
[389] *Loc. Cit.*

Likewise, Z. de Goldstein continues, the spectacle sees us and opens the perspective towards the gap between the seer and the seen.[390] Eventually, Lacan would locate the object *a* in this gap, contrary to the capital A, representing the symbolic order. The scopic, according to Z. de Goldstein, "is the narcissistic matrix of everything that Lacan designates as 'the imaginary order', that is differentiated from the symbolic order not so much by its matter (essentially the images of things), but by its structuration".[391]

In visual studies, Nicholas Mirzoeff's thoughts bear great importance. Mirzoeff returns to Lacan's conception of the gaze and states that "all seeing is the intersection of the gaze and the subject of representation, that is to say, the viewer: 'in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture'".[392] This begins to knit the discussion of violence, images, and the configuration of subjectivity both in the three Lacanian registers and the wider psychoanalytic and post-structural discussion on the subject and power.

If we follow visual studies theorist José Luis Brea's argument—along with many others—the process of subjectivation lies upon imaginary productions and consumptions.[393] This is echoed by Sergio Martínez Luna, who, in addition, affirms that images are located in the convergence of economy and the production of subjectivity.[394] Thus, examining the image as the conveyer of signifiers of hatred concerning certain subjects, exacerbated by neoliberalism, is crucial.[395] These points will return in the next section, with Jorge Alemán's concerns regarding the contemporary conditions of neoliberalism, whose objective is the production of subjectivity.

Considering the above, we can return to examine how we missed the moment of questioning our encounter with images of violence in the country. Undoubtedly, this question can have as many responses as variations to the question. Not only, as stated by Reguillo, is violence and its images not exterior to society, but following the three registers, they are

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[390] *Loc. Cit.*
[391] *Loc. Cit.*
[392] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Introduction to plug-in theory", in Mirzoeff, Nicholas, ed., *The visual culture reader,* New York, Routledge, 2nd ed., 2002, p. 112.
[393] "No doubt the Lacanian referent is indispensable here, and in particular the study of the constitution of the I in its relation to the construction of the gaze, as a structure of the institutive relation between the I and with the other—that also looks at us". José Luis Brea, "Los estudios visuales: por una epistemología política de la visualidad*",* in *Centro de Estudios Visuales de Chile: José Luis Brea,* 2009, p. 8.
[394] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual*..., Op. Cit.*, p. 101.
[395] As Esteban Dipaola contends, individuals constitute themselves according to experiences that organise contemporary visual and imaginal culture. Esteban Dipaola, "Producciones imaginales: Lazo social y subjetivación en una sociedad entre imágenes", in *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, 31(2), p. 315.

also constitutive for the configuration of subjectivity. Simultaneously confronted with visual and textual materials and immaterial stimuli, the socialisation process is done via discourses established symbolically in language. Consequently, introducing the *Real* of horror as a destabilising point of access to orient contemporary subjectivities seems more than plausible, even if not consciously intentional by all parts involved.

Decapitations: severing speech, imposing a gaze

In September 2006, the severed heads of five men were brusquely dumped on the floor of a bar in Uruapan, Michoacán. This event can be noted as one of the initial referents of the violence unleashed in Michoacán from 2006 onwards.[396] In that sense, it is also one of the oldest images that comprise the period of the war on drugs as we know it today and its subsequent visual representation. The following two images—of which the first one (image 2) was the most commonly reproduced—circulated at the time and continue to do so even in the absence of the images, but through the imaginary they installed as the heads in the *Sol y Sombra bar.*

[396] "In 2006, five heads were thrown on the bar's dance floor, which unleashed a wave of violence that does not stop". Carlos Arrieta, "Cabezas humanas en un bar: el día que llegó el terror a Michoacán" (FROM, 2 January, 2021: https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/cabezas-humanas-en-un-bar-el-dia-que-llego-el-terror-michoacan/).

Image 2[397]

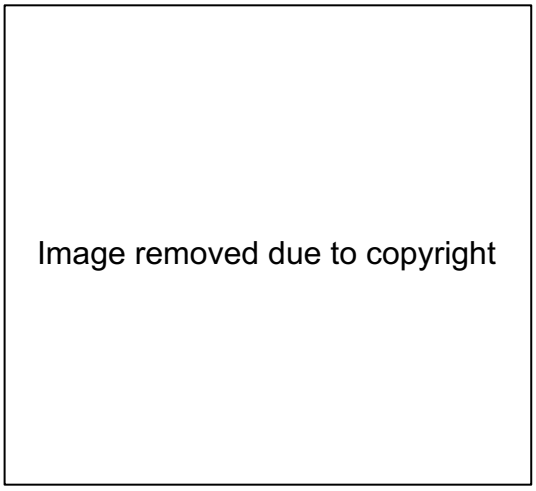

Image 3[398]

The angles of these images, particularly of image 2, selected by different media and academics, frame the heads, the floor, the trails of blood, the bags where the heads were carried, and the message left beside the heads. These images capture fragments, literally and metaphorically: the one head that appears to be in the intersection of two blood trails, eyes open, almost looking at the cardboard. Behind it, to the right, is a head with a bandage around the eyes. The other two heads are visible in the image and appear close together. The way these heads are placed corresponds with accounts of how these heads were emptied from a bag onto the floor.

Nevertheless, it also fragments the gaze: the viewers now, whenever this might be, come face to face with the image, and the spectators' gazes to the scene. The news reports recount how the bar was filled with dancers, staff, and clients who lived through the rushing-in of 20 armed men shooting at the ceiling and emptying the black bin bags on the dance floor. According to the article containing image 3, horror invaded the dance floor.[399] We cannot see that horror. We are supposed to imagine it on our own when seeing the images and being told the sequence of events.

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[397] Image can be found in: Bitacora, "Cinco decapitados, en Michoacán y un ejecutado en Nueva León" (FROM, 10 March, 2022: http://www.bitacora.com.uy/auc.aspx?363,7).
[398] Image can be found in: Antonio Albaladejo, " Aparecen cuatro cabezas cortadas ante la tumba del ex presidente Cárdenas, en México" (FROM, 10 March, 2022: https://www.vigoalminuto.com/2010/04/01/aparecen-cuatro-cabezas-cortadas-ante-la-tumba-del-ex-presidente-cardenas-en-mexico/).
[399] Arrieta, *Op. Cit.*

Another noteworthy element in these images is, as mentioned in chapter two, how many of these scenes are accompanied by *narcomantas,* or messages left by those who committed the crime. The message is significant and constitutive enough to appear in both images. Here, it goes as far as being a predominant element in the composition of the images. The text reads:

La Familia no mata por paga. No mata mujeres. No mata inocentes. Solo muere quien deve [sic] morir. Sepanlo toda la gente esto es: justicia divina.

The translation is: La Familia does not kill for money. Does not kill women. Does not kill innocents. The only ones who die are the ones who must. Know this all, it is: divine justice.

The 'appearance' or accompaniment of a text is, at the very least, a dissonant element. In the act of emptying bin bags filled with severed heads and blood, these 20 people carried a written message on a [mostly preserved] white cardboard in a combination of explanation, warning, signature and authorship, and, curiously, an appearance of an ambiguous personification of omnipresence and omnipotence, even presented as a benevolent one. They allude to knowing *who* the 'bad ones' are, not killing innocent people or women, thus deciding who lives and dies. Notably, this benevolence in not killing innocent people does not extend to not terrorising them while enjoying themselves in a bar.

The viewer, the reader, and those called into whatever material, imaginary or symbolic capacity possible to the event must, consequently, assume that these heads are their own proof of evil and criminality as well as a symbol of penalty and punishment—the severance of the head functioning as a metonymy in the symbolic tear of a social pact. The criminal organisation was even named The Family. Tellingly, as explained by Luisa Fernanda Gómez, this call of fraternity is an attempt at erasing the properly horrifying of the subject.[400]

Images 2 and 3 reveal the extremes of Mexico in that they are evidently extreme, showing the cruel limits of the imagination. However, it also contains and surpasses the extremes that border the images and the *real* of the event from what we know of the war on drugs, the discourses, the violences and cruelties, and the agony that can be inflicted physically and psychically. The trail of blood leading towards or away from the severed

[400] Luisa Fernanda Gómez Lozano, "De la libertad como discurso delirante", in *Desde el Jardín de Freud*, no. 15, 2015, p. 253.

heads, as if they moved, the dark gaping [oxymoronically] filled hole of a portion of the neck, if a fragment of the neck can be named so when it is the head that is the object.

Predominantly when seen through a Foucauldian perspective, in the extremes of the violences in Mexico, of which many are more of the order of cruelty, is it not the recognition, or lack thereof, of the other's subjectivity, even if subtle, a contestation of the viewer's own subjectivity? Taking Reguillo's quotation, "there is no exteriority in those violences"[401], when faced with images that continuously suggest that there are, in fact, those amorphous shadowed others that respond to the word *narco* who are responsible for the image we are viewing, how is that violence imprinted inwards, in the psychic realm, articulated together with countless other visual traces?

Returning to the previous chapter's discussion on violence, Leticia Glocer Fiorini explains that violence entails an attack on the other or others, thus disregarding alterity. That is, this type of violence entails a non-recognition of the other, and this non-recognition can be devised in the possible effects that take the form of psychic trauma and overflowing anguish that simultaneously are causes that act, recursively, upon subjectivity.

> The non-recognition of the other is always present, implying that the problem of narcissism is at play. The face of the other, according to Levinas, as an expression of alterity in its most extreme sense, is rejected. However, violence also entails the presence of the other as an exterminator. In other words, an other who assumes the objective of destroying those that are considered strange, different and, in consequence, threatening […] We can affirm that there is a complex interrelation between the issue of the recognition of the other and the acceptance of the difference with the configuration of an ethic of responsibility.[402]

In addition to Glocer Fiorini's take on the face concerning chapter one's commentary on the change images have incurred from the perspective of the face, this citation helps unearth how horror can simultaneously be an effect of subjectivity and constitute it. There is a pending question in Mexico whose un-utterance is significant to the questions we should be asking. Given the imaginary register's constitution of the body as a whole, at one [early] point, the question should have been, "*how* can we see and live with the piles of images of fragmented bodies, the rugged edges of the severed necks, the lifeless gaze of the heads?". Today, this essential yet forgotten question has ceded the way to more pressing ones.

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[401] Reguillo, Necromáquina. Cuando morir no es suficiente*, Op. Cit.,* p. 133.
[402] Leticia Glocer Fiorini, "Introducción", in Glocer Fiorini, Leticia, comp., *Los laberintos de la violencia,* Buenos Aires, Lugar Editorial, 2008, p. 14.

In the paragraph above, the question 'how' does not refer to the ability of vision to pose the gaze over an object and not even to the actual existence of these images. It is posed more immediately, in the subjectifying process of not seeing the body as fragments but as a whole. The existence, for instance, of the *nota roja* helps explain the lack of shock or horror and perhaps, alternatively, demonstrates the *jouissance* or morbid curiosity in seeing torn bodies—the drive to see the extent to which a body can be taken to before it stops being what we think of as a [complete] body. It is not that this question is no longer important, but its absence in the earlier stages of the war and its visual production, the lack or inadequate reflections on what it meant to see what we were seeing in the face of almost two decades of these images, no longer seems prudent to ask. What remains to ask is what we have mutually constituted subjectively and socially regarding the self and the other.

The subject and subjectivity

The wide range of disciplines that study the subject—here focusing on psychoanalysis and poststructuralism—converge in that the category of the subject cannot be reduced to dogma.[403] Neither Freud nor Lacan formulated static definitions for the subject[404]; the term is, according to Guy Le Gaufey, almost inexistent in Freud's work.[405] In the words of Emma Guillermina Ruiz, what Freud did was to establish the traces that delimit the place of "the symbolic, the interaction and of language in the deciphering of desire as well as the unconscious motives of the subject".[406] Meanwhile, in Seminar XXIII, Lacan says that "the subject is never more than supposed" which means, for Bruce Fink, that "the subject is never more than an assumption on our part".[407]

[403] Darío Groel, "El sujeto en psicoanálisis", in *Verba Volant. Revista de Filosofía y Psicoanálisis*, no. 2, p. 26.
[404] "One of the things that is so unusual about the Freudian subject is that it surges forth only to disappear almost instantaneously. There is nothing substantial about this subject; it has no being, no substratum or permanence in time, in short nothing we are accustomed to look for when speaking of subjects. We have a sort of flash in the pan, and then it is over". Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 42.
[405] Guy Le Gaufey, *El sujeto según Lacan*, Buenos Aires, El cuenco de plata, 2010, p. 7.
[406] Emma Guillermina Ruiz Martín del Campo, "El psicoanálisis y el saber acerca de la subjetividad", in *Espiral, Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad,* vol. XVI, no. 46*,* p. 41.
[407] Fink, *Op. Cit.,* p. 35.

However, Le Gaufey argues that Lacan made the subject one of the foundations of his work.[408] Based on Freud's work, Lacan developed the formulations relating to the subject more comprehensively by "articulating the question of subjectivation to the acquisition of language and insertion in a cultural order".[409] According to Kaja Silverman, Lacan follows the more classical narrative of the subject that begins with birth and then moves through the territorialization of the body through the mirror stage and accessing language.[410]

As mentioned earlier, particularly in the later stages of Lacan's formulations, the subject is, essentially, the non-corporeal entity that is "more or less divided by the unconscious".[411] Furthermore, the complex articulation between the three registers—that will be explained below—is conducive to explain or understand subjectivity. However, the complex twists and turns in Lacanian theories on the subject and subjectivity are, in a way, representative of his conception of the subject. Such is, for instance, the spatial and temporal appearance of the subject. As Fink states:

> Lacan never pinpoints the subject's chronological appearance on the scene: he or she is always either *about to arrive*—is on the verge of arriving—or *will have already arrived* by some later moment in time. Lacan uses the equivocal French imperfect tense to illustrate the subject's temporal status. He gives as an example the sentence "*Deux secondes plus tard, la bombe éclatait*," which can either mean "Two seconds later, the bomb exploded," or "The bomb would have gone off two seconds later," there being an implicit "if, and, or but": it would have gone off two seconds later if the fuse had not been cut. A similar ambiguity is suggested by the following English wording: "The bomb was to go off two seconds later." Applied to the subject, the French imperfect tense leaves us uncertain as to whether the subject has emerged or not. His or her ever-so-fleeting existence remains in suspense or in abeyance. Here there seems to be no way of really determining whether the subject has been or not.[412]

Thinking of the subject to come, like thinking of the meaning to come, related to earlier thoughts on Derrida, suggests a hiatus in the experience and possibility of meaning and thought to appear. However, it also suggests the processes by which memory invokes or provokes the subject. Hence the central role of memory in this project. Returning to the discussion on subjectivity, the fact that language itself remains ambiguous or open enough

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[408] Le Gaufey, *Op. Cit.,* p. 7.
[409] Ruiz Martín del Campo, *Op. Cit,* p. 41.
[410] Kaja Silverman, "The subject", in Evans, Jessica, Hall, Stuart, eds., *visual culture: the reader,* London, SAGE publications, 1999, p. 341.
[411] Groel, *Op. Cit.,* 26.
[412] Fink, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 63-64.

to allow for the distension in the subject's appearance, to take the word is significant in how the subject appears in the signifying chain.

> There, in the gap between linguistics and anthropology, in the wound between phenomenology and structuralism, Lacan proposes, through the discourse of psychoanalysis, a subversion of the subject and a new instance for the letter.[413]

Two of the most common misperceptions, as explained by psychoanalyst Darío Groel, are to think of the subject as one, uniquely the flesh and bone person that can occupy a space on the clinic's couch, and two, as a substance defined by some essentiality that groups it together.[414] The latter includes the "rational fiction" of being "the subject of law, the studying subject, the religious subject".[415] On the contrary, the subject is not an eternal and unchangeable category, even when talking about a single individual. There is nothing intrinsic to identity.

Later, from 1968 to 1969, in the seminar *From an Other to the Other,* according to Helí Morales, Lacan developed the subject's relation with the object *a* as a surplus of *jouissance.* Thus, Lacan halts his passion for the word and turns towards discourse as the support of the subject. Concerning discourse, Morales continues, Lacan states that the essence of psychoanalysis is that this is, curiously, a discourse without words. What is new and intriguing, Morales states in the relationship between discourse and *jouissance,* is that this is a discourse that articulates the renunciation (of *jouissance*) and the appearance of a *surplus* of *jouissance* where "discourse retains the means to enjoy inasmuch as it includes the subject".[416] This idea will become predominant when examining discourse, the social bond, and visuality.

Importantly, psychoanalyst Jorge Alemán notes that with the advent of a postmodern left—including Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Antonio Negri—that regarded subjectivities as an effect of historically constructed power relations, what ensued was the erasure of the structural dimensions of the constitution of the subject. Thus, for Alemán, from this moment began a critical intellectual development of subjectivity that excluded the subject.[417]

Alemán dates this back to the classical left, who realised that "there was no longer any subject to appeal to and undertake the historical destiny of the revolution and the

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[413] Helí Morales, *Sujeto y Estructura: Lacan, psicoanálisis y modernidad,* Mexico, Ediciones de la Noche, n.d. p. 23.
[414] Groel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26.
[415] *Ibid.,* pp. 26-27.
[416] Morales, *Op. Cit.,* p. 34.
[417] Jorge Alemán, "Diferencia entre sujeto y subjetividad", in *Virtualia,* no. 32, p. 1.

teleological version of History", leading to the appearance of a postmodern left that focused on subjectivity.[418] A subjectivity, he says, that is "historically constructed, generated by *dispositifs*, produced by technologies", consequently erasing, for the psychoanalyst, a key distinction, from a political standpoint, between the subject and subjectivity.[419]

Whilst Alemán recognises an unstable relationship between psychoanalysis and politics, as Freud[420] himself noted, he argues for a re-approximation of this relationship and the supposed psychoanalytic neutrality. In today's world, he observes through Lacan's capitalist discourse and "its historical mutation denominated neoliberalism" that the production of subjectivity is where it is aiming.[421] The fissures and fractures in the analytical experience are foreclosed by the capitalist discourse where:

> It is the new discontent, proper to capitalism, of performance and jouissance, where sexuality, work and sport have made an amalgamation where the subject is always beyond his possibilities, way beyond what is possible for them to sustain; it is a performance that always leads them to a logic of "entrepreneurial management" in the relationship with themselves and others.[422]

Lacan's capitalist discourse and Alemán's cavillations on it, as follows in the afore-cited text, are crucial and will be explored at length in the following chapter. However, it is essential to note that Alemán's differentiation between the subject and subjectivity, resting on the critique of the insistence on treating it historically, has to do with allowing to open the field of questioning that has amalgamated power relations, subjectivity, and the subject. The psychoanalyst seeks to question the structures that are dominating us to think of the possibilities of the un-appropriable for the capitalist discourse:

> This is the most difficult [to think of] because, being that there is no exterior and no historical law that governs its dialectical transformation, nor any subject *a priori* constituted to change it, instead of thinking, as a certain postmodern left has done, what type of uprising would be un-appropriable for the master, we must think, in any case, what is un-appropriable for the capitalist discourse.[423]

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[418] *Loc. Cit.*
[419] *Loc. Cit.*
[420] Freud had "understood that there is an incurable fracture in the subject, an incurable division, a real beyond sense and that the only subversive act in the analytic cure is that, with respect to the political fact, we must maintain either a scepticism, protecting a minimum distance with the master signifiers necessary to sustain the order of the world or a certain lucid cynicism that says: all these master signifiers are no more than semblants, they are worth what they are worth, but we cannot live without them". *Loc. Cit.*
[421] *Ibid.,* p .2.
[422] *Loc. Cit.*
[423] *Ibid.,* pp. 2-3.

Thus, for psychoanalysis, particularly in a Lacanian vein, the subject is that of the unconscious, the barred subject, the subject subjected to language, and the unconscious structured as a language. Departing from Alemán's critique, yet finding it necessary to frame subjectivity in this project, is "what produces in the subject 'the dimension of his representational construct of reality, of reality as a product of what is thinkable over a historical time' by the manipulation of the word".[424] The clarification "over a historical time" is precisely the focus of Alemán's critique, and what philosophy—and Foucault specifically—develops as subjectivity, and what is vital to develop further to understand Alemán's point.

For Foucault, there are two meanings associated with the subject: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge".[425] Both conceptions of the word subject, he clarifies, "suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to".[426] According to Cressida J. Heyes, the term with which Foucault captures the emergence of subjectivities or subjective positions is *assujettissement*.[427] It can be translated either as "subjectivation", "subjection", or "subjugation".[428] *Assujettissement* "describes a double process of the actions of power in relation to selves that is both negative and positive".[429]

Butler sustains that "Foucault's reformulation of subordination as that which is not only pressed on a subject but forms a subject, that is, is pressed on a subject by its formation, suggests an ambivalence at the site where the subject emerges".[430] This ambivalence, too, is sustained by psychoanalysis. Even though Foucault is best known for his queries on power, his interest was, as he clarified, on the subject. Because the subject is situated through complex power relations, he developed one to understand the other.

> It is true that I became quite involved with the question of power. It soon appeared to me that, while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very

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[424] Quiroz Bautista, *Op. Cit.,* p. 80.
[425] Michel Foucault, "The subject and power", in Dreyfus, Hubert L., *Michel Foucault, beyond structuralism and hermeneutics,* United States of America, The University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 212.
[426] *Loc. Cit.*
[427] Cressida J. Heyes, "Subjectivity and power", in Dianna Taylor, ed., *Michel Foucault: key concepts,* Durham, Acumen Publishing Limited, 2011, p. 159.
[428] *Ibid.,* pp. 159-160.
[429] "First, *assujettissement* captures the idea that we are subjected or oppressed by relations of power. When a norm (which Foucault understands as a standard to which individuals are held as well as by which populations are defined) imposes itself on us, we are pressed to follow it. In this sense assujettissement describes a process of constraint and limitation". *Ibid.,* p. 160.
[430] Judith Butler, *The psychic life of power. Theories in subjection*, California, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 6-7.

> complex […] It was therefore necessary to expand the dimensions of a definition of power if one wanted to use this definition in studying the objectivizing of the subject.[431]

What Foucault did was to "expand the dimensions of a definition of power […] to use this definition in studying the objectivizing of the subject".[432] Consequently, in his analysis, the constitution of the subject depends on the historicity of the period of study. In other words, the subject is historically constructed through [power] relations. In opposition to Alemán, Foucault states that to differentiate between events[433], there is a refusal "of analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures, and a recourse to analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics".[434]

> Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no 'meaning', though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics. Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts.[435]

The historical contextualisation Foucault suggests is more than "the simple relativisation of the phenomenological subject".[436] The point is not to conceive the subject as one that evolves with history itself. On the contrary, this would suggest a phenomenological approach whereby there are certain constitutive qualities to the subject that can be followed throughout history and, thus, an evolution can be traced.[437] So, Foucault

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[431] Foucault, The subject and power, *Op. Cit*., p. 209.
[432] *Loc. Cit.*
[433] I will return to the following by Foucault because of its significance with the earlier explorations of the events. "One can agree that structuralism formed the most systematic effort to evacuate the concept of the event, not only from ethnology but from a whole series of other sciences and in the extreme case from history. In that sense, I don't see who could be more of an anti-structuralist than myself. But the important thing is to avoid trying to do for the event what was previously done with the concept of structure. It's not a matter of locating everything on one level, that of the event, but of realising that there are actually a whole order of levels of different types of events differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects". Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977,* New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 114.
[434] *Loc. Cit.*
[435] *Loc. Cit.*
[436] *Ibid.,* p. 117.
[437] *Loc. Cit.*

aims for an analysis that instead looks at the historical framework and ponders over the subject's place within. The term he used to address this form of history is genealogy, "which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history".[438]

Therefore, Foucault, as explained by Heyes, is not looking in history for the realisation, or evolution, of human potential, but rather differences—even intensifications—in the subjections to power.[439] Returning to the quotation above and given that discourse is indispensable for power to operate, Foucault's divergence on the formation of subjectivity relating more to the structures of war—and here we can add violence—than of language is startling. Whilst it can be assumed that discourse has to do with language—and for Lacan, as explained below, it does—for Foucault, as Stuart Hall elucidates, discourse has a different meaning. It concerns "the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods".[440] Discourse, then, has to do with language *and* practice.[441] In the words of Foucault:

> We must not imagine that there is a great unsaid or a great unthought which runs throughout the world and intertwines with all its forms and all its events, and which we would have to articulate or to think at last. Discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices, which cross each other, are sometimes juxtaposed with one another, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of each other […] We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity.[442]

Even if they oppose one another at times, psychoanalysis and post-structural philosophy place the subject at the centre. Discourse, even from different perspectives, is the place of inscription and interpretation. For Foucault, power, through discourse, operates through a pretence of truth: "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and

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[438] *Loc. Cit.*
[439] Heyes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 164.
[440] Stuart Hall, "Foucault and Discourse", in Seale, Clive, ed., *Social Research Methods: A reader,* London, Routledge, 2004, p. 346.
[441] "By 'discourse', Foucault meant 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment… Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect". *Loc. Cit.*
[442] Michel Foucault, "The order of discourse", in Young, Robert, *Untying the text: A Post-Structuralist Reader,* Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 67.

we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth".[443] For Lacan, the subversion of the classical notion of the subject of consciousness was in favour of a subject that not only makes the discourse but it is made *by* discourse, thus *trapped* in it.[444]

This is how Morales envisions it when stating that Foucault develops the subject in relation to power, history, and truth. Lacan, on the other hand, works on discourse in four ways. That is, four discourses structured with four places as functions of discourse. These discourses are founded in and by a relation with the impossible and the real, as well as by the gaps that each of these discourses contain. Thus, for Lacan, the subject of the unconscious is given within the articulation of knowledge, *jouissance,* and the impossible.[445]

Subjectivity in the Mexican paradigm of violence

When describing the role that psychoanalytic theory can have in visual studies and visual culture, Sydney Walker states that the scopophilic instinct explains the basic drive and appeal towards images and, consequently, the deep ties between visualities, subjectivity and the unconscious.[446] Then, since by seeing we are seen, there is a trajectory in which the forceful appearance of the image and the gaze's transgression over the object by its very act of seeing, image and violence are as bonded together as is the subject to innate violence as developed in the previous chapter.

In other words, the production of subjectivity from the three registers' perspective indicates the language's shortcomings in steering violence. This happens when the distance from signifier to signified goes to almost zero[447], as has happened with the discourses of violence in Mexico. Furthermore, since the constant production of imagery has included a marked component of horror, the subjective positions are inevitably entwined with the social

[443] Foucault, Power/Knowledge, *Op. Cit.,* p. 93.
[444] Alexandra Kohan and Patricia Rodríguez, "Entre Freud y Lacan: el sujeto", in V Congreso Internacional de Investigación y Práctica Profesional en Psicología XX Jornadas de Investigación Noveno Encuentro de Investigadores en Psicología del MERCOSUR. Facultad de Psicología - Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, 2013, p. 327.
[445] Morales, *Op. Cit.,* p. 37.
[446] Sydney Walker *et al.,* "Complicating Visual Culture", in Studies in Art Education, Vol. 47, No. 4, p. 313.
[447] Montalbetti, *Op. Cit.,* p. 179.

and cultural aspects of visuality when confronting and trying to assimilate the horror of the Real of violence and cruelty in Mexico.

> In its focus on the individual subject and their personal psychic investments in images, psychoanalytic theory can lead to sensitive and nuanced explanations of the image/subject relationship, complementing other methods of visual study. […] in operating from the premise that a subject's identity is built upon and sustained by an unconscious identification with images, psychoanalytic theory can enrich socio-culturally informed theories because it offers a way of explaining the deeply affective, even irrational, links between visual experiences and the formation of subjectivity.[448]

Certainly, what is evidenced with this is not the ways in which subjectivities have adapted themselves to the engrained visuality of violence and imagery as signifieds, but that subjectivity has as much led to the explosion of these images and the representation of certain subjectivities within them, as we, then, are reflectively contained and shaped by them. Some manifestations of these subjectivities will be developed here and in the last chapter in the forms of terror, fear, trauma, and the concept of the victim. Horror, terror, and fear—including the concept of abjection—will be developed hereafter.

As mentioned earlier, decapitations hold a primordial place in Mexican imagery and symbolism, as images 2, 3, and 4 below show. According to Diéguez, "decapitations summon corporal theatricalities"[449] and, in doing so, they irreversibly transform the body's disposition. More than annihilating life, they generate an object that is more than a metonymy; it becomes the implantation of terror.[450] According to González Rodríguez, the damage of decapitations is the reign of darkness and loss, "the actuality of abjections and the affront of all the known uses of coexistence".[451] When decapitated, the cadaver, following Brigitte Adriaensen's thoughts, does necessarily signify death but also what we aim at discarding in order to live.[452]

These authors' thoughts on decapitations are meaningful in that they underline the horror that lies in the extremes.[453] Adiaensen's words echo Glocer Fiorini's about the non-

[448] Walker, *Op. Cit.,* p. 313.
[449] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 234.
[450] This remits to Allen Feldman's argument that "The act of violence transposes the body whole into codified fragments: body parts or aspects which function as metonyms of the effaced body and of other larger totalities. The violent reduction of the body to its parts or disassociated aspects is a crucial moment in the political metaphorization of the body". Allen Feldman, *Formations of violence: the narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 69.
[451] Sergio González Rodríguez, *El hombre sin cabeza,* Barcelona, Editorial Anagrama, 2009, p 61.
[452] Adriaensen, *Op. Cit.,* p. 126.
[453] The mention of abjection will be examined later in the chapter.

recognition or disavowal of the other's subjectivity: the generation of an object that holds a variety of affects and drives, as well as being used as a representation of a precise order. Nelson Arteaga Botello's essay *Decapitations and mutilations in contemporary Mexico* analyses how decapitations cannot be understood merely from a perspective of social decomposition. These acts are not irreflexive, spontaneous ones. Decapitation is rooted, for the author, "in a process of social creation that expresses a particular articulation between culture and power, a specific form of construction of subjectivities".[454]

> This reconfiguration happens effectively by what Gros denominates as the consolidation of states of violence: situations in which the destruction of the enemy is sought by focalising the body as a space of suffering with the objective of publicly showing its fragility. Said states of violence, as the author points out, are perpetrated by a multiplicity of new figures: "the terrorist, faction leader, mercenary, [the delinquent], the professional soldier, the computer engineer, the security manager, etc.".[455]

[454] Nelson Arteaga Botello, "Decapitaciones y mutilaciones en el México contemporáneo", in *Espacio Abierto Cuaderno Venezolano de Sociología,* vol. 18, no. 3, p. 466.
[455] *Loc. Cit.*

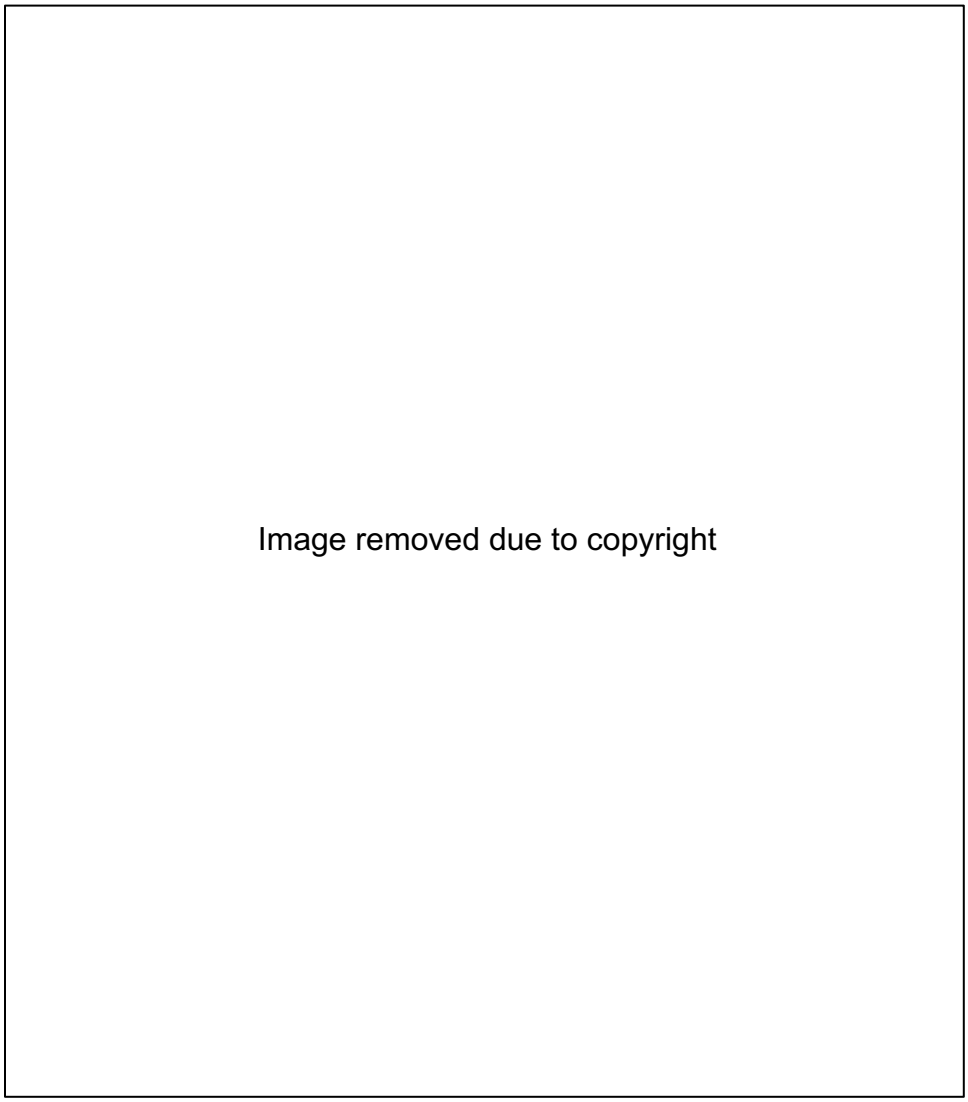

Image 4[456]

Image 4 was taken in 2011 in Ciudad Juárez. Four men were dismembered and decapitated, and the body parts were scattered throughout the city. The two depicted in the images were found first, with the message that reads, “Cartel Nuevo de Juárez sigan reclutando aquí los atendemos”, which translates roughly to “keep recruiting, Cartel New Juarez, we will deal with you here”.[457] One of the heads rests on top of the

[456] Image can be found in: Proceso, “El sexenio de la muerte. Memoria gráfica del horror”, special issue, October 2013, p. 82.
[457] El Nacional, “México Arrestan par de sicarios con cabezas humanas en Acapulco” (FROM, 15 May, 2023: https://elnacional.com.do/mexicoarrestan-par-de-sicarios-con-cabezas-humanas-en-acapulco/).

improvised *narcomessage* on an icebox that is usually used to transport decapitated heads.[458] The other perspective of the image shows what looks like an arm.

As image 4 suggests, the message, including both the heads and the text, is not only directed to the opposing cartel; it is directed to the government and the public. Moreover, many scenes of violence and cruelty have become, up to a point, staged for the camera. Arteaga Botello develops this argument regarding decapitations. He recognises the different elements that constitute the publicness of decapitations—which in the next chapter will be expressed as a theatre of cruelty or *necrotheatre.*

Arteaga Botello states that with the early appearance of decapitations in 2006, these became a form of exercising violence and cruelty amongst individuals and groups associated with drug trafficking. However, these were turned into "a meaning-loaded mechanism of communication for the whole of society".[459]

> In the first place, the heads are placed in public spaces of easy access, such as public buildings, beaches, bars, bridges, pathways, and in front of shops. Whilst in some cases the bodies were found, in most cases, it was not so, underlining the importance for the decapitator that the head be found, as if trying to indicate the degree of violence the body can be subjected to. In the second place, when the bodies have been located, these too show signs of having been exposed to significant violence and cruelty since, in many cases, they present mutilations, particularly of hands and feet. This means that before giving death to people, it is very likely that diverse forms of torture are practised.[460]

The differentiation in the treatment of body and head—showing the head and hiding the body—, for Arteaga Botello, suggests a hierarchy in inflicting pain on the body—converting it into an object that crystallises the torturer(s)'s power—and the punishment beyond death—by dramatising the scene of the severed head.[461] This differentiation, going beyond a simple giving death to the other—the coup de grace that Arteaga Botello mentions—evidences the complex recognition and annihilation of the other.

Returning to the discussion on the differences between violence, aggression, and cruelty, whilst these acts are undoubtedly violent, they *show* something beyond the attack of the other whilst the subject is recognised. The purpose is to make the other suffer whilst extracting something—pleasure—from it. However, the consequent display of said pleasure

[458] *Las hieleras* is the term for heads found in containers or 'boxes' for ice storage.
[459] Arteaga Botello, *Op. Cit.,* p. 479.
[460] *Ibid.,* pp. 479-480.
[461] *Ibid.,* p. 80.

of cruelty, the making the other suffer for the sake of making suffer, consistently calls for a gaze.

What happens, then, when thinking of Butler's assertion that the public is created "on the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized and diffused"[462]? This can be explained by the other extreme mentioned earlier: not showing violence within the image but evidencing the oppositional un-appearance of violence. The visible in the invisible and the invisible in the visible.

For Butler, the construction of the public is done on the basis that there are bodies whose names are not uttered, which accounts as a prohibition of public grieving.[463] This is evidenced in the apparent contradiction of intensifying the gaze over a scene that is simultaneously obscure, as with the image below. Image 5 is another side to the extremes, related to the *encobijados* (bodies wrapped in blankets), but with the additional implication of being placed inside a rubbish bag. It has an additional, grim meaning.

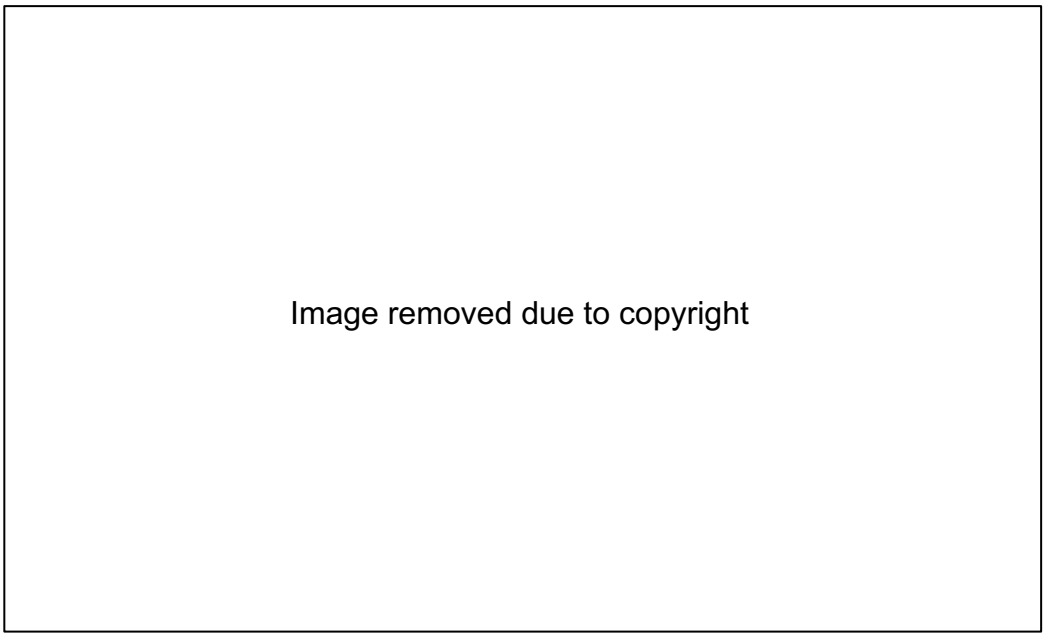

Imagen 5[464]

[462] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The powers of mourning and violence,* London, Verso, 2004, pp. 37-38.
[463] *Ibid.,* p. 37.
[464] Image can be found in: Infobae, "En menos de 24 horas aparecieron tres cadáveres embolsados en Ciudad de México, autoridades sospechan de 'Fuerza Anti Unión'" (FROM, 15 January, 2020: https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2018/12/18/en-menos-de-24-horas-aparecieron-tres-

The news story of image 5, like the one of image 1 and the vast majority of similar news stories, reproduces the discourse of the cadaver [insert one or more neologisms] found somewhere. Within a single article, this story gathers the "finding of" three bodies that were *embolsados*. In the part of the text that corresponds to the person in image 5, with just a few sentences dedicated to him, use the word "bundle" followed by, in the next sentence, the word "victim" and pointing to the "advanced state of decomposing".[465]

Both mechanisms—*encobijar* and *embolsar*—may serve practical reasons, like transporting bodies containing remains or odours, lengthening the time it takes to find the body, hiding the crime, hide the body and the face, amongst others. That is the first veil. Nevertheless, the symbolic and imaginary aspects that both the act and its dissemination unleash are equally important. These constitute the second veil, the visual and psychic excision over what is being seen. From a symbol of containment and disposal of waste and trash, they cover whole bodies and body parts. The leap is not inconsequential.

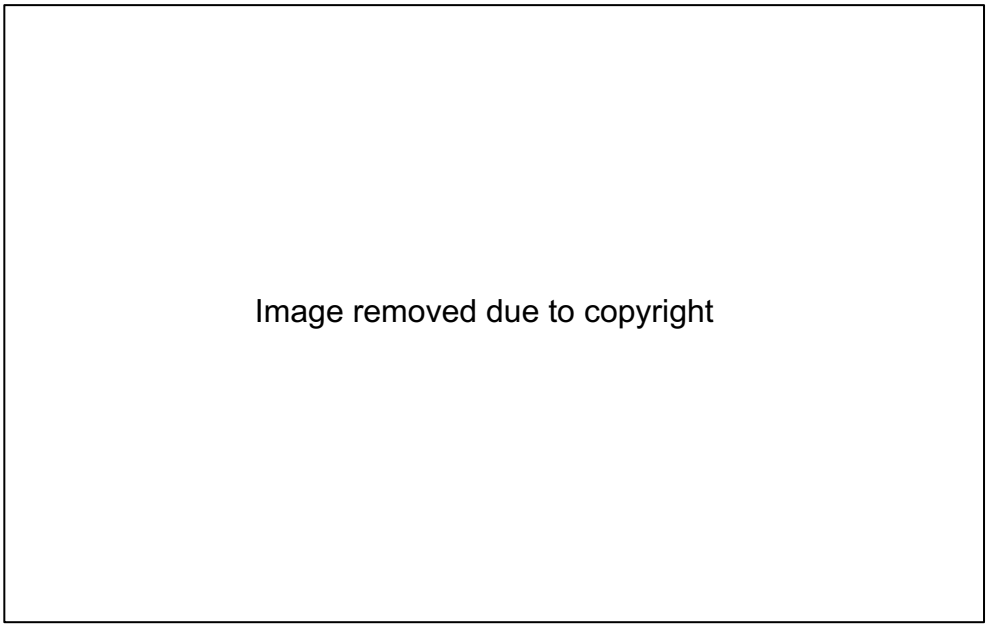

Image 6[466]

cadaveres-embolsados-en-ciudad-de-mexico-autoridades-sospechan-de-fuerza-anti-union/). The image in question is the first one of the article.

[465] Infobae, "En menos de 24 horas aparecieron tres cadáveres embolsados en Ciudad de México, autoridades sospechan de 'Fuerza Anti Unión'" (FROM, 18 January, 2020: https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2018/12/18/en-menos-de-24-horas-aparecieron-tres-cadaveres-embolsados-en-ciudad-de-mexico-autoridades-sospechan-de-fuerza-anti-union/).

[466] Image can be found in: Martha Cervantes, "Hidalgo: Encuentran bolsas de basura con cuerpos en Tizayuca" (FROM, 20 May, 2023: https://laverdadnoticias.com/mexico/Hidalgo-Encuentran-

Images like image 5 and, significantly, image 6 reinforce the notion that there are lives [pre]destined for this end—they can, visually, be undifferentiated from actual waste. Laksmi Adyani de Mora Martínez and Roberto Monroy Álvarez studied this mode of dealing with the remains of people, naming it the "trashification of the bodies" (*basurización de los cuerpos* in Spanish). Based on Rodrigo Mier's article, "the disposable of the earth", which states that there has been a discursive rearranging where the human is considered as waste, as trash, De Mora Martínez and Monroy Álvarez study the practice of *embolsados* in the state of Morelos in Mexico from this perspective.[467]

They develop the idea of the disposable from two perspectives. On the one hand, "the dispensable, erasable, eliminable, marginal in the current economic reconfiguration of the political system" where "minority" groups such as women, impoverished, indigenous, or immigrants hinder consumerist development.[468] On the other hand, they refer to the disposable in the sense of the contemporary administration of waste and solid residues.[469] According to the authors, the idea of bodies as residues is incorporated into discourses by which the person becomes part of the residue, the useless and dispensable.[470] Following Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics", that will be developed further in the next chapter, the authors argue that the instrumentalisation of the material destruction of bodies is an effect of the neoliberal economic model.[471]

Interestingly, for the authors, the process of "trashfication" of bodies—thinking of certain lives as inherently without value, dehumanised—is likewise translated into the image: they have no right to an image.[472] Further on, this lack of image is, instead, referred to as a non-human image, reducing the subjectivity of the killed people into "an image that we could call non-human because it exceeds the limits in which we have thought that condition; non-human image because its murderers constructed it thus through a double violence, as much

bolsas-de-basura-con-cuerpos-en-Tizayuca-20230428-0286.html). The image in question is the first one.

[467] Laksmi Adyani de Mora Martínez and Roberto Monroy Álvarez, "La basurización de los cuerpos. Nuevas maneras de violencia en Morelos", in Peña González, Rodrigo, and Ramírez Pérez, Jorge Ariel, *coords., Violencias en Morelos. Atlas de la seguridad y violencia en Morelos,* Mexico, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos: Colectivo de Análisis de la Seguridad con Democracia, 2015, p. 121.

[468] *Ibid.,* pp. 121-122.

[469] *Ibid.,* p. 122.

[470] *Ibid.,* p. 123.

[471] *Ibid.,* p. 122.

[472] *Ibid.,* p. 123.

physical as discursive".[473] Developing specifically the case of two women's bodies found in black bin bags, the authors argue that:

> By creating an aesthetic for these photographs, which selects what is seen and what is left out, in the first instance, a representation is produced, the representation of the Other, the non-human. The image thus also works to organise our perception and our thought, generating an epistemological separation from what a woman is, not only by objectifying her in the human-trash transformation but also by denying her subjectivity and particularity by showing her as waste. The spectator does not feel appealed by the dead, for it is always the other (and otherness) the victim; there is no empathy, and instead, there is pure revulsion, the revulsion produced by the pestilence of trash and its particular decomposition. Moreover, an acritical terror is produced, one that is not thought of; it only exists, a blind terror, disarticulating in itself.[474]

The quotation is profound and significant—aside from the reference to the non-human Other, which in this project is seen from a Lacanian perspective and, thus, not as non-human. The subjects in these images are represented and signified as non-human, turned into objects, things, killed and disposed of as if disposing of trash. However, they are not only treated as such by the murderers and torturers but by the spectators, too. Nevertheless, whilst these subjectivities are cast at the edges of the social bond, their inscription within the cast-off circuits establishes their existence. That is because the outside has implications for the inside. Even when existing from the margins or outside of them, these subjectivities are made known by that very bordered presence that constitutes an inside from which they are pushed away.

The subjectivities created by the war on drugs are not unempathetic, a term that has been broadly questioned, but non-positioned on facing and listening to the other. The silence and the face, mentioned in chapter one, take here a more overwhelming concern in the present day. Is the issue, as the authors state, that the spectator does not feel—see or hear—the appeal of the dead other, hiding any trace of face and voice? Or can it be, too, that a peculiar subjectivity of terror and survival pushes the subject to differentiate oneself from that in which we see ourselves because the bonds are inflicting those discourses into all subjectivities?

Thus, one characteristic or type of subjectivities produced by the so-called war is, on the one hand, implicit and, to an extent, complicit in the trashfication of other subjectivities; and, on the other hand, through the will of differentiating oneself from those subjectivities

[473] *Ibid.,* p. 126.
[474] *Ibid.,* p. 129.

destined to these ends, the non-recognition of alterity, deepening the ridges of what and who can still be within a group or community and what cannot. Remembering Glocer Fiorini's quotation[475], violence implies a complex interrelation of non-recognition and the presence of another as an exterminator. An ethics of responsibility [to the other] likewise entails the same complexities of recognising the other. However, the issue of revulsion is essential and will be developed below through the concept of abjection.

Abjection, the gaze, and its images

In addition to the categories and concepts mentioned thus far, there is a word that appears when referring not only to the violence lived in Mexico but also to the images it produces; this word is abjection. The word abject comes from the Latin word *abiectus,* in which the prefix *ab* underlines the separation, or the exterior of a limit, and *iacere* to throw, or that which is thrown out, to the exterior. The word abject shares the same root as the word object: *ob* above, and *iacere* throwing: something that is put forth and implies a launching to reach it.[476]

Julia Kristeva opens *Powers of Horror* with a powerful description of abjection that, at the same time, much like the word violence, evidences the detours implied in this term. Within abjection looms, she states, "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated".[477]

From a psychoanalytic perspective, both the abject and the object are opposed to the I. The object is where desire is directed; it defines the I by being attracted to it. Meanwhile, the abject is the fallen object, "where laws, desire, and meaning collapse" and thus opposes the I by establishing the limits outside of which identity is lost.[478] Hence,

[475] "We can affirm that there is a complex interrelation between the issue of the recognition of the other and the acceptance of the difference with the configuration of an ethic of responsibility". Glocer Fiorini, Introducción, *Op. Cit.*, p. 14.
[476] Carolina Herrera Aparicio, *Análisis comparative de las obras de Teresa Margolles, Enrique Metínides y Martha Pacheco sobre la representación del cadáver* (thesis), Queretaro, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2017, p. 8.
[477] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An essay on abjection,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1982*,* p. 1.
[478] Herrera Aparicio, *Op. Cit.,* p. 8.

"abjection is neither subject nor object: it is a limit or border".[479] Abjection, as sustained by Carolina Herrera Aparicio, is a separation from what does not conform to the I: what belongs to the body but must be rejected when entering the social or cultural realms.[480]

Everyone's lives, according to Herrera Aparicio, are comprised of two abject events: birth and death.[481] However, it is only until death that we reach the height of abjection, for there is nothing more in the body that can be conserved.[482] In between those events, the mother teaches the child to separate themselves from the abject, of bodily substances such as vomit, urine, excrement, or blood, to establish the borders of their subjectivity. For the child's psychic, sexual, and social formation, there are things produced by their body that should not be objects of pleasure and must be rejected. Desires for the abject are repressed.[483]

In the event of death, coming across the others' deaths, Kristeva finds that the cadaver signifies the specular quality of recognising the aspect of death that, in turn, needs to be discarded in order to inhabit the other part of abjection: life. There is, thus, a border in the condition of living, "the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything".[484] Thus, we come to question not the extremes of living and dying, of birth and death, but the borders that are formed in between and through which we circulate thrusting one into the other and vice versa.

> The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death […] Deprived of world, therefore, *I fall in a faint*. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away.[485]

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[479] *Loc. Cit.*
[480] *Loc. Cit.*
[481] "During birth, the child is thrown into life amid the mother's blood, placenta, amniotic fluid, and other bodily substances. From the beginning, there is a separation between that which will conform the child and the remains that do not form part of them". *Ibid.,* p. 9.
[482] *Loc. Cit.*
[483] *Ibid.,* pp. 8-9.
[484] Kristeva, *Op. Cit.,* p. 3.
[485] *Ibid.,* pp. 3-4.

What, then, are we to conceive of abjection in—or of?—images of violence? Is it the bodies, the severed heads, the trickles and traces of blood, the torn limbs and their flaying flesh, all the body parts where they should not be? Or is it that we come upon these scenes without being present to witness them? That it is, somehow, as in the quotation above, not the identifiers that signal the extinction of life—the flat line of cardiac rhythm—but that which is so Real that deliberating over it, confronting it would confront my existence?

> The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite […] Abjection […] is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you.[486]

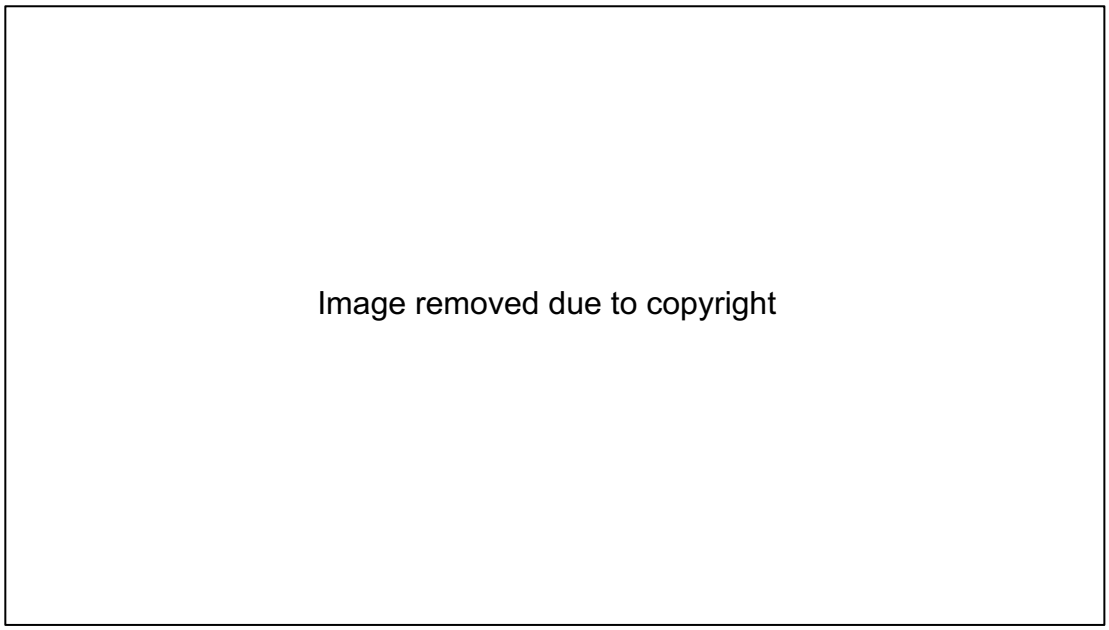

Image 7[487]

[486] *Ibid.,* p. 4.
[487] Image can be found in: Ezequiel Flores Contreras, “Imparable la violencia en Guerrero: Ocho decapitados y 10 ejecutados el fin de semana” (FROM, 20 May, 2023: https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/estados/2016/11/21/imparable-la-violencia-en-guerrero-ocho-decapitados-10-ejecutados-el-fin-de-semana-174137.html).

In the poor-quality image above, image 7, by the magazine *Proceso*, we can see Kristeva's ponderings regarding the borders of the seen and unseen, the abjection that goes beyond the mere unseemly sight of filth or uncleanliness that surrounds us. It is the breaking down of the imaginary totality with which we identify as subjects, the rules that constitute our bodies as such, as one, not as the sum of fragments. We witness the extent to which bodies can become (or are?) heaps of body parts that can be endlessly broken down and organised in a macabre spectacle.

This image 7, in particular, attests to the imaginary and Real registers in the formation of subjectivity. The image borders on incomprehension: the almost waxy appearance of the leg to the left, black plastic bags that cover (almost as a cocoon) and are, in turn, layered with bits of clothing, blood, and illegible but intuited decapitated bodies, the *narcomanta* on the upper right-hand corner written in red over white. All these elements, all these pieces of bodies that can hardly be singularised—cloth, plastic, and flesh—push apart whilst melting together, aided by the poor, hurried quality of the image.

Whilst circumscribed to the examination of abjection in art and representation, Hal Foster establishes that "both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'".[488] We can take this as the lack of signifiers to what we see—those that can be readily captured in the *narco* discourse—but also the subjective itching that questions my own subjectivity, the shift in the knotting of the registers. In Foster's words, the abject "is a fantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it—too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject".[489]

> The crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is her slippage between the operation *to abject* and the condition *to be abject*. Again, to abject is to expel, to separate; to be abject, on the other hand, is to be repulsive, stuck, subject enough only to feel this subjecthood at risk. For Kristeva the operation *to abject* is fundamental to the maintenance of subject and society alike, while the condition *to be abject* is corrosive of both formations. Is the abject, then, disruptive of subjective and social orders *or* somehow foundational of them, a crisis in these orders *or* somehow a confirmation of them? If a subject or a society abjects the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation?[490]

[488] Hal Foster, *The return of the real: the avant-garde at the end of the century,* Massachusetts, October Books, 1996, p. 153.
[489] *Loc. Cit.*
[490] *Ibid.,* p. 156.

As Juan Manuel Díaz Leguizamón elucidates, the abject is not only a negation of morality. Reacting to it from that position, he argues, would be easier. The intolerable quality of the abject is due to its perverse character because it twists the law, but to do so, it must bear it in mind.[491] What affects does the image above provoke? If we are to take this image in the order of the abject, then one of the affects it would necessarily produce—and here we transit to the realm of subjectivities implied when reading these words and seeing these images—is disgust. Carlos Figari remarks that disgust is the primary human reaction to the abject.

> Disgust represents the feeling that characterises the separation of borders between man and the world, between subject and object, and between interior and exterior. Everything that must be avoided, separated and even eliminated: the dangerous, immoral, and obscene between the demarcation of the foul and disgusting.[492]

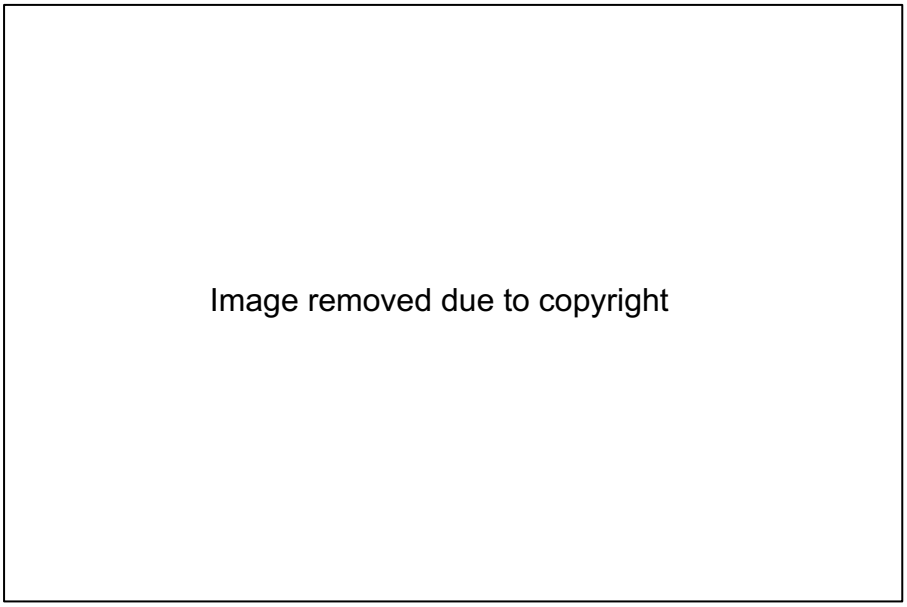

Image 8[493]

[491] Juan Manuel Díaz Leguizamón, "Lo real y la mirada. Potencia de la imagen desde el minimalismo y el arte del horror", in *Artes, la revista,* vol. 14, no. 21, p. 101.
[492] Carlos Eduardo Figari, "Las emociones de lo abyecto: repugnancia e indignación", in Figari, Carlos and Scribano, Adrián, comps., *Cuerpos, subjetividades y conflictos: hacia una sociología,* Buenos Aires, Fundación Centro de Integración, Comunicación, Cultura y Sociedad, 2009, p. 133.
[493] Image can be found in: Jean-François Boyer, "México, un país en guerra: narcos, menores, autodefensas" (FROM, 24 May, 2023: https://www.nodal.am/2017/08/mexico-pais-guerra-narcos-menores-autodefensas/). The image in question is the third one of the article.

When thinking of image 7 alongside image 8, both depict representations, albeit not only from different angles but from the opposites in that separation, of decapitations, as well as the constant production of images of this kind, the borders between real and imaginary evidence the fantasmatic quality that Foster mentions. It is so close to the borders of interior-exterior, subject-object that it causes panic. It causes disgust. However, it also causes *jouissance,* and here, the question of the gaze and the real re-enter into play. *Jouissance,* says Kristeva, causes the abject to exist:

> One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object a [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject.[494]

Jouissance, then, elucidates why, for Kristeva, the victims of the abject are its fascinated victims. Taking *nota roja* photographer Enrique Metinides, Herrera Aparicio asks after the voyeur, those spectators who see the scene of a crime, tragedy, or disaster and cannot seem to look away. It is an attraction towards the abject, the fragments, a morbid interest, a guilty pleasure, of that which does not find a place in society's narrative: "the pleasure of being violated by the invasion of abjection in its limits through the gaze".[495] In other words, *jouissance:* the unpleasurable pleasure, the discomforting and unenjoyable enjoyment: that which causes an opposite reaction in another psychic register.

Jouissance explains a facet of the subjectivities organised in the face of the abject images produced in Mexico. They must not only cause pain, horror, and fear, but they certainly do in their unconscious counterpart. They also hold a mesmerising, inviting pull to see what should otherwise be concealed. The invitation to witness that which we cannot bear to see in ourselves, fear for ourselves, and need to push away in order to be ourselves speaks to that very self. The abject becomes fascinating and repulsive.

Image 8 navigates between these borders. It does not necessarily produce the disgust that image 7 does. Instead of the severed body, the severed head burst differently in the margins of horror and disgust. Image 8 presents something more akin to the ominous or uncanny in Freud.[496] The face, perhaps, marks that difference. However, it is a distorted,

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[494] Kristeva, *Op. Cit.,* p. 9.
[495] Herrera Aparicio, *Op. Cit.,* p. 46.
[496] The uncanny (Das Unheimliche) "is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression". Jamie Ruers, "The Uncanny" (FROM, 13 October, 2023: https://www.freud.org.uk/2019/09/18/the-uncanny/).

bloated, and almost sleeping face that stands over large containers—used for a myriad of liquids or solids—that may even contain their bodies. It is gruesome yet tolerable, probably aided by the black-and-white tones—the message, trapped in the middle, pressed by the containers. We cannot see much, yet we see too much: heads that do not belong there—or anywhere else than with their bodies.

Nevertheless, these are abject others, not just bodies, but vestiges of subjectivities long thrown to the margins of the abject. Rigoberto Reyes observes that, in the processes of abjection, these acquire a political quality to them "when the object that produces disgust or revulsion is a human body in a situation of extreme precarity that is physically or symbolically expelled so that some order or some desperate identity prevails".[497]

> Linking together Butler and Kristeva's proposal, I think that in diffuse and informal environments of war, the abjection of certain bodies is commonly related to political and economic processes that configure precarious lives or lives not worth living, which are usually thrown to the numerous margins that are opened around power centres encrusted in the megalopolis, spaces that Mike Davies has denominated as 'hyper-degraded human areas' that work as a 'landfill for the surplus population''.[498]

These expelled, repulsed bodies are made so by violences that need not be physical aggression but take place even in subtleties. Sometimes "they are expressed eloquently through gestures, appellatives, jolting, gazes, and even voice tones".[499] This leads us to think, or confirm, that for abjection to be so, there is a transgression, and this transgression is not innate but constructed. This goes in line with Figari's statement that the emotions that the abject elicit are not innate or natural but a discursive effect of certain ideological formations that sustain the wide range of social and cultural regulations.[500]

Thinking of abjection in these terms, produced by ideological formations, which are in turn sustained through social and cultural configurations, the dead bodies and their images are made abject by those in a social bond. There are, thus, perhaps, different layers of effects to these acts, deaths, and images: causing pain and desubjectivising of a person whilst living;[501] humiliating the body whilst dead, making it say and show *something*. There

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[497] Rigoberto Reyes, "Liquidados. Cuerpos abyectados y vidas precarias en la megalópolis", in Perrée, Caroline, Diéguez, Ileana, coords., *Cuerpos memorables,* Mexico City, CEMCA, 2018, p. 36.
[498] *Loc. Cit.*
[499] *Ibid.,* p. 37.
[500] Figari, *Op. Cit.,* p. 138.
[501] That, when done so with such brutality, entails, instead, a cruelty that recognises the other but wishes to annihilate them.

is also a call to the other, a spectator, for this to be known and seen. Perhaps, the call comes from those outside the social bond, the abject, a call to be seen.

The social bond

The subject Lacan developed in the 1950s was enmeshed in a relationship with the Other, which constituted him. As Morales states, first, Lacan thought of this relation as dialectical and, later, as structural. This means that the structure precedes the subject, which they will come to occupy upon birth. This structure is, for Lacan, that of language, the law, and desire, the affect desire of the law.[502] Upon speaking, the subject does so with the signifiers presented to them by language; however, between what the subject means to say and the unintended effects of that speech. Morales explains that this is due to the signifier being in the field of the Other, the treasure trove of signifiers.[503]

Lacan established that the social bond is founded on the symptom and discourse as fields of the Other. Discourse functions as a necessary structure that conditions speech, behaviours and actions in the subject, social relations, and with the nonhuman world.[504] To explain how the functions of speech affect acts, behaviours, and even affects[505]—and understand the intersubjective relationships (bonds) built on latent violence, aggression, and repression in this context—Lacan established the schemata of the four discourses.

The schemata determine how "differently structured discourses mobilize, order, repress, and produce four key psychological factors—knowledge/belief, values/ideals, self-division/alienation, and jouissance/enjoyment—in ways that produce the four fundamental social effects of educating/indoctrinating, governing/brainwashing, desiring/protesting, and analyzing/revolutionizing".[506] The four discourses operate through the different occupations

[502] Morales, *Op. Cit.,* p. 235.
[503] "The subject falls within a desiring configuration formed as a desire constellation. Desires that, when incarnate in relationships structured by the law, will give place to that named as the subject". Morales, *Loc. Cit.*
[504] Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses", in Bracher, Mark *et al*., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse. Subject, Structure, and Society,* New York, New York University Press, 1994, p. 107.
[505] "Even affect is a function of discourse: it is produced by 'the capture of the speaking being in a discourse insofar as this discourse determines [the speaking being] as object'". *Ibid.,* p. 108.
[506] *Ibid,* p. 109.

and positions of four functions S1, S2, $, a.[507] Each of these positions represents the placement of the signifier as follows:

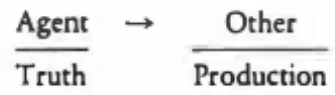

Diagram found in Mark Bracher, "On the Psychological and Social Functions of Language: Lacan's Theory of the Four Discourses", p. 107.[508]

The rotation[509] of the four functions (S1, S2, $, a) produces the four discourses: of the university, of the master, of the hysteric, and of the analyst.

Diagram found in Jacques Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis. Book XVII,* New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007, p. 31.

Lacan's four discourses begin with the master's discourse, states Fink—the second one in the diagram above. That is both "for historical reasons and because it embodies the alienating functioning of the signifier to which we are all subject".[510] Thus, it holds a central space in the discourses as a "sort of primary discourse".[511] Essentially, the discourse of the master refers to the one that "promotes consciousness, synthesis, and self-equivalence by

[507] According to Daniel Gutiérrez Vera, S1 symbolises the master signifier. It is the promise of significance, the signifier that represents the subject to another signifier, S2. The latter is the "textual and repetitive knowledge", the signifier of interpretation. $ is the barred subject—divided by language. The *petite objet a,* (a) is the lost object of desire; "a" is situated in the Real, as it cannot be represented. Daniel Gutiérrez Vera, "La textura de lo social", in *Revista Mexicana de Sociología,* vol. 66, no. 2, 2004, pp. 321-322.

[508] "The left-hand positions are occupied by the factors active in the subject speaking or sending a message, and the right-hand positions are occupied by the factors that the subject receiving the message is summoned to assume. The top position on each side represents the overt or manifest factor, the bottom position the covert, latent, implicit, or repressed factor-the factor that acts or occurs beneath the surface. More specifically, the top left position is the place of agency or dominance; it is occupied by the factor in a discourse that is most active and obvious. The bottom left position is the place of (hidden) truth, the factor that underlies, supports, and gives rise to the dominant factor, or constitutes the condition of its possibility, but is repressed by it". Bracher, *Op. Cit.,* p. 109.

[509] The rotation refers to which function (S1, S2, $, a) is occupying the placement of the signifier (Agent, Other, Truth, Production). "The four functions mentioned (S1, S2, $, a) represent an unalterable order series that is repeated incessantly S1 -> S2 ->a ->S ->S1 ->S2 ->a ->S ->S1 while rotating occupying four asymmetric places, which are those that organise the discourse where the subject operates". Gutiérrez Vera, *Op. Cit.,* p. 323.

[510] Fink, *Op. Cit.,* p. 130.

[511] *Loc. Cit.*

instituting the dominance of the master signifiers (S1), which order knowledge (S2) according to their own values and keep fantasy (i.e. $<>a)[512] in a subordinate and repressed position".[513] Examples of discourses of the master are philosophy, science, and politics.

The discourse of the university refers to the innate occupation of the position of receiver of speech. It is the "unassimilated piece of the real that is the object of desire of those around us".[514] It is the position that leads to the barred subject. Consequently, in this discourse, "'knowledge' replaces the nonsensical master signifier in the dominant, commanding position".[515] The discursive structure here, with the predominant position S2 in the place of "agent" and its rationalizing progress, has led, in sociologist Daniel Gutiérrez Vera's opinion, to the "disenchantment with the world".[516]

As Fink positions it, in the discourse of the hysteric, the split subject is in the position of the Agent, the dominant position, and by addressing S1, it is called into question. Fink explains that while the university discourse takes its cue from the master signifier, "the hysteric goes at the master and demands that he or she show his or her stuff, prove his or her mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge".[517] Hence, the discourse of the hysteric has to do with neurosis and the emergence of physical symptoms that "manifest in the most striking way possible the subject's refusal to embody—literally to give its body over to—the master signifiers that constitute the subjects positions that society, through language, makes available to the individuals".[518]

Finally, the discourse of the analyst would be the "ultimately effective means of countering the psychological and social tyranny exercised through language […] because it puts receivers of its message in the position of assuming and enacting the $—that is, their own alienation, anxiety, shame, desire, symptom—and of responding to this $ by producing new master signifiers (S1)".[519]

> The analyst plays the part of pure desirousness (pure desiring subject), and interrogates the subject in his or her division, precisely at those points where

[512] $ refers to the "barred subject", which constitutes the division of the subject by language. Being barred entails a lack—the lack by which language constitutes but fails insomuch as something will always fall outside the signifier and its signification.
[513] Bracher, *Op. Cit.,* p. 117.
[514] *Ibid.,* p. 115.
[515] Fink, *Op. Cit.,* p. 132.
[516] Gutiérrez Vera, *Op. Cit.,* p. 330.
[517] "The hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective division, the contradiction between conscious and unconscious, and thus the conflictual, or self-contradictory, nature of desire itself". Fink, *Op. Cit.,* p. 133.
[518] Bracher, *Op. Cit.,* p. 122.
[519] *Ibid.,* p. 123.

> the split between conscious and unconscious shows through: slips of the tongue, bungled and unintended acts, slurred speech, dreams, etc. In this way, the analyst sets the patient to work, to associate, and the product of that laborious association is a new master signifier. The patient in a sense "coughs up" a master signifier that has not yet been brought into relation with any other signifier.[520]

Gloria Patricio Peláez Jaramillo maintains that Lacan's discourse theory shows how discourse regulates bonds by controlling enjoyment (*jouissance)*. The regulation of enjoyment has to do with the "presence of language as a field of the Other that give the subject the signifier that represents him so that the sense of what it is, is mediated by its relation to another signifier".[521] For Lacan, the Other is not a person, but "where our speech takes on meaning".[522] The big Other (Autre, or A) is the radical alterity that transcends the imaginary attributions of otherness of the little other (autre, or a). That is, the Other (A) is inscribed in the symbolic order, and the other (a) in the imaginary.[523]

Following a psychoanalytic perspective, the social bond is established in and by discourse and the symptom, not as a difference between individual and social subjects. A discourse, returning to Alemán and a psychoanalytical perspective, is a "term that, in a general sense, designs how certain effective statements and its consequences are determined".[524] Centring the discussion on the discursive aspect of the social bond further provides the ground for exploring the crisscrossing, encounters, and clashes between the social bond, visuality, and violence. Therefore, in this research, I focus on the 'social bond' rather than the general—and at times ambiguous or insufficient—term of society.

Alemán argues that for Lacan, a discourse is a structure without words that implies places or terms where the act of *taking the word* is inscribed. Subjects are inscribed in discourse, which is, therefore, the place of birth of the social bond: "there is no social bond outside of discourses because the subject and the Other do not have any medium that establishes their bond to language".[525] Discourse, insomuch as directed at others/the other, makes the social bond; it *is* the social bond.[526] As María Fernanda González establishes,

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[520] Fink, *Op. Cit.,* p. 135.
[521] Gloria Patricia Peláez Jaramillo, "El sujeto y el lazo social en el psicoanálisis", in *Revista Affectio Societatis,* vol. 8, no. 15, p. 7.
[522] Vincent Le Corre, "Click and destroy: the clinic of video games", in Sinclair, Vanessa and Steinkoler, Manya, eds., *On psychoanalysis and violence. Contemporary Lacanian perspectives,* New York, Routledge,2019, p. 98.
[523] I am alluding to this Lacanian concept When referencing the Other (A) throughout the text.
[524] Jorge Alemán, *En la frontera. Sujeto y capitalismo,* Barcelona, Editorial Gedisa, 2014, p. 29.
[525] *Loc. Cit.*
[526] Beatriz Taber, "Lazo social" (FROM, 17 August, 2020: https://www.acheronta.org/acheronta14/lazosocial.htm).

discourse is the bond conceived as the word directed to the other. Emphasising not the *word* but the *directed to.*[527] Given that discourse, according to González, is not *of* the object but a discourse that speaks a message holding within it another message or messages, the question would be: who speaks and to whom?[528]

For Gutiérrez Vera, the social and subjective spheres are inscribed as the two sides of a Moebius band.[529] Something that happens collectively can have effects on the social. The various discontents of sociality can be read through the bond exerted through unequal and fragmented relations and positions. This is Gutiérrez Vera's proposition, to learn to "read" the social text—or images, in this instance—that could lead us to "address the society's phenomena from a perspective of the signifier inscription".[530]

Stressing the discursive aspect of the social bond elicits thinking of the place of articulation between the subject and the Other.[531] It enables looking at the social fabric from the perspective of its very structure, where words and images become messages directed to the other. As Gutiérrez Vera argues, the social bond allows for a more critical analysis of the discontinuities that are proper to the bond between subjects. Predominantly, as González disputes, it breaks from the notion of the One and enables looking at the social fabric through its structures where words and images can occupy the messages directed to the other.

Subjectivity, the social bond, and images of violence

As mentioned earlier, abjection and the emotions it arouses stem from discursive effects. If discourse constitutes the social bond, then it bears questioning what bonds we are establishing based on abjection in Mexico. Not only towards that which must be discarded to live but how are we enjoying (as in *jouissance)* the abjection to which we are daily witnesses. Thus, thinking of the constitution of other social bonds—as will be developed in chapter five—must be done by elements transcending abjection—the disgust and the pleasure in that disgust or the disgust in the pleasure.

[527] María Fernanda González, *Op. Cit.,* p. 4.
[528] *Ibid.,* p. 5.
[529] Gutiérrez Vera, *Op. Cit.*, p. 313.
[530] *Ibid.,* p. 337.
[531] Norma Alejandra Marcia Maluf, "Lo perverso en el discurso social y político" (FROM, 25 September, 2020: https://www.acheronta.org/acheronta14/perverso.htm).

Lilian Paola Ovalle suggests thinking of Mexico's abject images beyond the morbid pleasure that can be derived from seeing these images. Hence, she positions the bodies in these images as messengers of terror loaded with significations. For Ovalle, abject images hurt susceptibilities and are therefore hard to contemplate, and the decisions on whether or not to reproduce them are debated on the one hand in terms of the voyeurism of some who think it possible to identify an aesthetic or eroticism of violence, and the ethical value of images of horror, on the other.[532]

Between these positions of extreme seeing—voyeurism, *jouissance,* ethics—Ovalle states that the argument and intention of her text are to drift away from these positions into an approach that would overcome the repugnance that can incur in not seeing these images in any way. This can lead, she states, to recognising in the images that "the devices of violence of the networks of illegal drug commercialisation in Mexico are not exclusively destined to the act of ending the life of someone who breached a contract and are not exhausted in the event of the execution".[533]

There seems to be a leap in Ovalle's conception of complete fascination—however perverse or noble—in the encounter with the images and their utter rejection—to the extreme of not seeing or engaging with them in any manner. It appears as if Ovalle is condensing the positions towards images of violence into either a "moving away from the postures that highlight the morbid pleasure that can be derived from observing these images" or the "exercise with which the repulsion that would lead some to not seeing in any way these types of images is overcome".[534] More than recognising the reductive or partial jump between positions, because these are indeed subjective positions before images of violence—and her later expansion into the social and political aspects of these that are of extreme soundness and will be developed in the next chapter—Ovalle's proposition is unearthing the extremes mentioned earlier.

That is, it is not only the abject, gruesome, horrifying, or crude within the image which is hard to look at; it is what we can imagine happening in its extremes or frames. What Ovalle categorises as abject images—*tiro de gracia* (the *coup de grace*), *baleados* (people that have been shot), *encajuelados* (bodies found in the trunks of cars), and *encobijados* (bodies wrapped in blankets)—I would suggest that predominantly the latter two, are of the broader order of images of violence and, thus, of the real—and potentially of horror.

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[532] Ovalle, Imágenes abyectas…, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106.
[533] *Loc. Cit.*
[534] *Loc. Cit.*

The objective goes beyond sustaining that there is a *jouissance* in seeing and, even more, in consuming these images for, as explained earlier, had they no hold subjectively or socially, they would not proliferate as they do. The morbid pleasure in seeing is not unique to the *nota roja* or images of violence in general. However, especially in the term 'abject images', a degree of *jouissance* is implied. Nonetheless, the importance lies in analysing the layers of abjection and questioning what discourses and bodies have become abject and what other subjectivities and bonds are established around them. As Manero Brito establishes:

> The violent forms of eroticism and sexuality, the daily violence in relationships, and the bursting of the limits of social violence that we have witnessed in recent times in our country are no phenomena of *exteriority* in relation to the institutions that constitute our society and culture. That is what *is there* underlying our civilising effort, constituting itself as a strange and exterior sediment to our society, an un-recognised element, as *our own alienated creation.*[535]

Fear and horror[536] have become inextricable from living in Mexico. As Diéguez maintains: "fear has become our closest companion; so much has it been dispersed and expanded to become a fog that envelops us, and we become habituated to living with it".[537] Mexico's relation with death before the war on drugs was well-known for its traditional and ritual imagery. Some of the deaths that have been recreated either by the executioners or photographers (or anyone else involved in the scene) are not only reminiscent of the previous conceptions of death—familiar to every Mexican—but also transforming it into one that fills with terror.

The constant bombardment of threats and fear—in their surreptitious and ultimately linguistically limping forms—resemble Adriana Cavarero's *Horrorism:* "As violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language".[538] Cavarero argues that both terrorism and war are ambiguous and vague terms that, in their overuse, are left undefined. The following quotation, in turn, brings back a central argument made in chapter one regarding the relationship between language and violence:

> In the discourse of politics and the media, "terrorism" is today a word as omnipresent as it is vague and ambiguous, its meaning taken for granted so as to avoid defining it […] A similar problem arises with regard to the substantive

[535] Manero Brito, Más allá del horror, *Op. Cit.*, p. 148.
[536] "As violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language" Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism. Naming contemporary violence,* New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 2.
[537] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 185-188.
[538] Cavarero, *Op. Cit.,* p. 2.

> "war" and the lexical constellation revolving around it. Forget about the terminological weirdness of an oxymoron like "humanitarian war"; even the notion of "preventing war" gives rise to well-founded objections, and the expression "war on terror" mounts a direct challenge to the political lexicon of modernity, which, as is well known, reserves the qualification "enemy" for states alone. Equivocal and slippery, the situation is linguistically chaotic. Names and concepts, and the material reality they are supposed to designate, lack coherence. While violence against the helpless is becoming global in ever more ferocious forms, language proves unable to renew itself to name it; indeed, it tends to mask it.[539]

Cavarero presents "horror" as a way to point to the aspect of the crime instead of focusing on the politics behind words such as "war" or "terror".[540] Drawing on both Butler's and Cavarero's arguments—crossed by Foucault's thoughts—the body may be the material site of inscription of violences, the dismemberment[541], the decapitations[542], the tortures, but it likewise marks the psyche, the psychic apparatus of life: subjectivity. This is what Butler refers to when, by citing Foucault, she states that the soul "becomes a normative and normalizing ideal according to which the body is trained, shaped, cultivated, and invested; it is a historically specific imaginary ideal (*ideal spéculatif*) under which the body is materialized".[543]

Conversely, for Aaron Andrade Valdivia, whose thoughts are pertinent for their specificity in the Mexican case, terror, social terror, in the narco-state Mexico, is a mechanism of social control "whose immediate objective is the territorial control and the submission of the people".[544] The ultimate objective is disposing of natural resources and the "installation of a tissue of legal and illegal enterprises".[545] For Andrade Valdivia, contemporary terror finds its roots in the neoliberal system, and the ones in charge of

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[539] *Loc. Cit.*
[540] *Ibid.,* p. 3.
[541] "What is unwatchable above all, for the being that knows itself irremediably singular, is the spectacle of disfigurement, which the singular body cannot bear". *Ibid.,* p. 8.
[542] "Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the head is detached from the body without the need for its decapitation. The head is detached from itself, severed. The body is an ensemble, articulated, composed, and organized. The head is not made of something other than holes whose empty centre represents well the spirit, the point, the infinite concentration of itself. Pupils, nasal cavities, mouth, tear ducts, and ears are holes and outlets dug outside the body. Put side by side with other holes, those below, this concentration of orifices is united to the body by a thin and fragile canal, the next crossed by the cord and some vessels ready to fill or to burst". González Rodríguez, *El hombre sin cabeza, Op. Cit.*, pp. 163-164.
[543] Butler, The psychic life of power, *Op. Cit.,* p. 90.
[544] Aarón Andrade Valdivia, "¿Cómo se construye el terror social narco-estatal en México?", in *Revista Lationamericana, Estudios de la Paz y el Conflicto,* vol. 2, no. 3, p. 118.
[545] *Loc. Cit.*

producing it are organised crime, groups belonging to the state's armed forces, and other para-state or para-police actors. With this, Valdivia argues, he wishes to underline the state's centrality in the direct production of terror.[546]

Whilst this argument differs from Zavala's discursive construction of the *narco* as the root of evil in Mexico, at the same time, it does not in that it includes the state as the facilitator and operator of that terror. Furthermore, even if those discourses are based on false and exaggerated ideas-turned-signifiers, horror and terror are real in that these acts, massacres, tortures, and disappearances exist and, visually in some cases, and have manifestations in the subject, and are real, in the sense of the unsymbolisable, unsayable horror.

> The body is the existential space where history touches materiality. Social trauma for us is witnessing, seeing, and knowing about power's violence against an akin one or ones that appear as bodies in quality of lumps, broken, slashed, disposed of their identity and without "proper" name. They are torn from the relationship with the "proper" body that blows up the hole where the "proper name" should have been, revealing a hole in our own subjectivity that is manifested as a symptom that anguishes and is lived as "fear", "terror" of being another victim more and remains in the quality of the un-known. Taking away the proper name, erasing their identity, more if they are not found. A void remains, a number if at all, a tattoo or nothing… then a mass grave.[547]

This last quotation reunites crucial aspects addressed so far and others that will be developed in the following chapters. The theoretical concepts and approximations, along with the different authors' views regarding subjectivity and the social bond, serve not only to focus the research question more broadly but also to explore how they can be grounded in the Mexican context. From abstract concepts stemming from philosophy and psychoanalysis, the objective of this chapter has been to situate them as driving forces in the context of violence and cruelty in the country. Exploring the extremes of violence and cruelty implies working with what is unknown or cannot be put into words as much as what is seen and conceived. Violence, cruelty, and the gaze implicate the subject. The discourses that enable the social bond are affected by the subject and affect subjectivity in turn.

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[546] *Loc. Cit.*

[547] Leticia Hernández Valderrama, "Violencia y psicoanálisis. Una escritura de nuestro tiempo", in *Revista Electrónica de Psicología Iztacala*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 2528-2529.

Chapter four: icononecropolitics

> Images always belong to
> a time, they are inhabited
> by the pathos of a time,
> and they radiate
> knowledge in that sense.
> —Ileana Diéguez[548]

Chapter three discussed the visual extremes in which subjectivity and the social bond oscillate in producing violent images in Mexico. By situating three practices—*decapitaciones* (decapitations), *embolsados* (bodies wrapped in bags), and *encobijados* (bodies wrapped in blankets)—of giving death and staging bodies, the intention was to question the positions that can be taken before these different notorious practices—different in how bodies appear or are delivered—yet symbiotic in their essence of discourses of horror that succeed in instilling fear in the social body.

What role does visuality in Mexico play in (dis)articulating the relations between subjects, the configuration of *being with* or in common with the other? Whereas previously the emphasis had been on discussing images and representations of violence singularly, albeit on their effects on subjectivity and the social bond, this chapter's objective is to establish the social aspects of the image of violence through the hypothesis of a violent visuality. The chapter hypothesises that violence and visuality have negatively influenced each other, reproducing and exacerbating the spectacularity and grammatic of horror that have ultimately spilt onto the cores of the social bond. Since the social bond can never be completely disintegrated, the question goes towards the structures, filled with terror, fear, melancholy, or enjoyment, that have had the capacity to rebuild or reshape the social bond.

This chapter will first address a common notion when discussing images of violence in Mexico: their abundance. For this, a first examination of the broad aspects of vision and visuality will be conducted to try to expand on how this argument limits the scope of the issue. The first part will define the relationship between visuality, subjectivity and the social bond and will build on the arguments presented in chapter two to understand the singular and social configurations resulting from the spectacle of violence, mainly focusing on the

[548] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 407.

Mexican state's power operating between images and discourse. This also entails developing the visual discourses that enable the proliferation of this violence—the violence of the image.

Then, the chapter will continue with questions introduced in chapter three concerning horror and fear and analyse them as a mechanism of power. The interaction between these—horror, fear, and power—will be developed from the perspective of the production of a politics of violent visuality—an *icononecropolitics*—and its use in the capitalist and neoliberal discourses of subjectivity production and social bonds articulations. The discussion will continue with the concept of horror and Ovalle's argument of the ritualisation and naturalisation of violent ways of giving death. For this, the concepts of 'theatres of cruelty' and '*necrotheatre'* prove essential to explore the staging of bodies and their place in a discursive structure of violence and cruelty.

This chapter discusses violence and cruelty, how they appear in singular images, and how subjectivity and the social bond interact with visuality. This last point implies contexts where images, signifiers, and discourses come together to form today's violent visual culture in Mexico. The violent visuality discussed here is inscribed within a discursive structure capable of modifying subjectivity and the social bond. Hence, this chapter will consider both the effect of violent images on the social bond and the tears in the social bonds inversely affecting the proliferation of violent images.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, violence in Mexico is inseparable from capitalist and neoliberal structures. A differentiation between categories of what is essential for the state—capital, natural resources, and physical space—and what is not—human (and other) lives—will figure in this analysis. This differentiation and its violent enforcement has been present in Mexico, Central and South America, following the United States' geopolitical influence in the region during the Cold War, combined with the introduction and expansion of neoliberal policies, which contributed to exacerbating the violences in the region.[549]

I will build on transfeminist philosopher Sayak Valencia's term *gore capitalism* to explain the "creation of an epistemic displacement grounded in violence, drug trafficking, and necropower" and its relation to images of violence.[550] Valencia is explicit on the fact that violence is inherent to the human condition but that we are bearing witness to more "sophisticated" forms of exercising violence. These are hyper-specialised methods "founded

[549] Carlos Alberto Navarro Fuentes, "Necropolítica, biopoder, biopolítica y resistencias distópicas", in *Revista de Filosofía, Letras y Humanidades,* year XXV, no. 79, p. 428.
[550] Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore,* España, Melusina, 2010, p. 191.

in an instrumentalist and economic rationality designed to inflict pain, to torture, and kill".[551] Working on Laura Suárez González de Araújo's argument that the main instrument of power over the visible is the screen as a "sophisticated filter for subjectivation"[552], I will discuss the management of visibility through political and economic factions.

Images and visuality of violence

Following the last chapter's introduction to the gaze and the scopic drive, it is worth developing, through visual studies and visual cultures literature, how the gaze(s) constitutes visuality. A first differentiation between vision and visuality is pertinent. Vision, as established by Hal Foster, has to do with a physical operation. In contrast, visuality is more of a "social fact".[553] Whilst vision and visuality share aspects in common and consequently do not oppose one another, they are different categories for addressing what is seen and the knowledge that ensues from seeing and what is seen.

The main difference is that vision relates to the physical ability to see, and although this is implied in visuality, visuality is structured historically, culturally, and socially. The difference, as Foster argues, is "between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques, between the datum of vision and its discursive determinations".[554] This, in turn, explains the differences in "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein".[555] Thus, it is not merely having the ability to see something that will establish the signifiers or knowledge we gain from them.

There is no natural or inherent way of seeing, considering and employing a vision, given that visuality is as much rooted in discourses as language. Going back to the first chapter, to memory and tracing that is the emphasis of the project, this is one of the premises throughout the dissertation: being surrounded and bombarded with images of violence does not necessarily imply seeing them and, even whilst consciously see(k)ing them, not

[551] *Ibid*., p. 105.
[552] Laura Suárez González de Araújo, "'No se puede mirar'. Apuntes para una refl exión sobre la violencia y lo visible en el mundo moderno", in Meneses, José Manuel and Martínez Andrade, Luis, eds., *El camino de las fieras. Violencia, muerte y política en el Sur global,* Puebla, acd Editorial, 2016, p. 143.
[553] Hal Foster, "Preface", in Foster, Hal, ed., *Vision and Visuality. Discussions in Contemporary Culture,* Seattle, Bay Press, 1988, p. ix.
[554] *Loc. Cit.*
[555] *Loc. Cit.*

everything present in them, structuring them, or sustaining them constitutes a totality or is comprehensible.

Moreover, beyond pointing to the differences between looking and seeing, the emphasis here is on that which is not apparent through the discursively constructed filters of vision, the remains, the unspoken, unverbalised. That which does not become conscious even after being visually confronted with it. The traces that, although invisible or unconscious, articulate and build subjectivity and thus, in turn, the social. This argument can be further expanded in Foster's view through the Lacanian shift regarding visuality:

> Lacan's account of visuality seems to me historically extremely important. It marks a fundamental shift away from the ground on which vision has been previously thought. The nineteenth century saw the rise of a theory of vision in which the truth of vision lay in the retina, in the physiology of the eye and the neurology of the optical apparatus. In the twentieth century the conception of vision as primarily a domain of retina and light has subtended a number of key activities […] Postmodernism has entailed moving beyond this episteme and acknowledging the fact that the visual field we inhabit is one of meanings and not just shapes, that it is permeated by verbal and visual discourses, by signs; and that these signs are socially constructed, as are we.[556]

Visuality can thus best be thought of through Mitchell's maxim "visuality is not just the social construction of vision but the visual construction of the social".[557] This central argument evidences how images of violence are not purely isolated elements representing a reality of conflict in the country. Furthermore, this anti-origin notion demonstrates how violence, subjectivity, social bond, and visuality are in constant reflective shifts without one having a more significant predominance or organising the rest. Striding away from the notion of origin towards an understanding of the imbricated relationship between subject, images, and visuality further challenges discourses that reduce the appearance of violence to that of the image or that it is the image that somehow creates violence.

Whilst there is, indeed, a violence of the image—and violence *in* the image—they do not, by themselves, create an analysis of the violence of our time, particularly what we are witnessing in Mexico. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, there are two main assertions in discussing images of violence. The first is that the image is violent because it can relentlessly bombard us in a stream of images. The second is that the incessant violence in the world

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[556] Norman Bryson, "The gaze in the expanded field", in Foster, Hal, ed., *Vision and Visuality. Discussions in Contemporary Culture,* Seattle, Bay Press, 1988, pp. 106-107.
[557] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture", in *Journal of Visual Culture,* vol. 1(2), p. 170.

leads to a perceived omnipresence of the image that is "simultaneously or by turns, indecent, shocking, necessary, heartrending".[558] The troubling aspect is that these "lead very quickly to the elaboration of ethical, legal, and aesthetic demands […] for the purpose of introducing regulations that would control violence or images, the image of violence or the violence of images". [559]

The image has long been an object of religious, philosophical, and aesthetic debates. These have centred on the nature, the ethics, the ability to create knowledge, and the representation of the image. The advent of the image of violence has reactivated debates that situate them at the core of the social event. Notably, the use of images during the two world wars elicited many thinkers of the time to ponder their condition. González de Araújo argues that it was then that civilisation's discontents—referencing Freud's text—fully reached the visual field. According to González de Araújo, both Freud and Walter Benjamin were preoccupied with the extent to which cruelty had become an image.[560]

Furthermore, since this extended into "an instrumentalisation of violence shown in the images in newspapers that touched the traumatic real", it required a gaze that could confront them.[561] This concern was present in thinkers like Aby Warburg, Siegfried Kracauer, and Georges Bataille to "combat the violence of a reality turned image: a struggle against the tautology of the visible (that which claims: 'what is seen, is what is seen')".[562] The tautologies of the visible would then require an "alteration of the framing and the amplification of the depth of field in order to stretch the point of view of images overly saturated with violence for them to be reduced to a single plane of the event".[563]

For Juan Manuel Díaz and Carlos Mario Fisgativa, the images of violent acts are paradoxical because they are evidence of the limits of representation—as Derrida would hold—and the impossibility of making sense of what is seen or shown—as sustained by José Alejandro Restrepo. Their existence, according to the first, demands searching for ways to give them a sense or a meaning.[564] But how to extract meaning from them when, as Hans Belting indicates, "the old, symbolic power of images seems to have faded, and

[558] Nancy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.
[559] *Loc. Cit.*
[560] González de Araújo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 138.
[561] *Ibid.,* p. 140.
[562] *Loc. Cit.*
[563] *Ibid.,* p. 142.
[564] Juan Manuel Díaz Leguizamon and Carlos Mario Fisgativa Sabogal, "Selección y archivo desde una aproximación crítica a la relación entre imágenes y violencia", in *Revista Filosofía UIS,* 19 (1), p. 258.

death has become so abstract that the question of its meaning scarcely arises"?[565] These are questions that have been addressed throughout the previous chapters.

The pictoric turn is associated with an expansion of images in culture. It is Brea's pivotal idea, as gathered by Martínez Luna, to locate the exacerbation of image production as part of the contemporary capitalist process of accumulation and transfiguration of the world into merchandise. Images are part of this process: they become autonomous, and they are no longer subjected to the objects they mediate or represent.[566] However, for the author, this autonomy responds only partially to the quantitative expansion of images. This proliferation would, in any case, be "a symptom of a change of regime more profound that demands new forms of approximation to reality, to analyse it and exercise a critique".[567]

Consequently, the arguments and theories relying on the numeric aspect of images, usually called overabundance, fail to consider the subjective and social implications of the image in and with visuality. Furthermore, they leave aside an examination of power and agency in images.[568] Images are not just out there subject to our creation or, on the contrary, completely autonomous.[569] The immeasurable data of the quantity of (re)produced images does not in itself signify any single aspect of the complexity of visuality in our time.

Indeed, these arguments can be empirically based on a visual approximation *to* or *of* the world. However, the numeric component seems to acquire importance only when coupled with the spheric ramifications of the visual turn. To respond to the life of the image in contrast to the number of images, a first step would be to look beyond or behind the nomination of quantity as a signification or clarification of the argument to be made of this assertion. The judgement of the increasing shift to(wards) images hides, too, what Martínez Luna argues:

> If images now are only accomplices to the impoverishment of experience and the shrinkage of imaginaries, subjectivity, and socialisation to the principles of merchandise, then we must get rid of them to make the ideology that they help support apparent.[570]

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[565] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 84.
[566] Sergio Martínez Luna, "La cultura visual contemporánea y la cuestión de la materialidad. Imágenes, mediaciones, figuralidad", in *Escritura e imagen*, vol. 12, 2016, p. 95.
[567] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit,* p. 13.
[568] "To specify the relation between pictures and discourse understood, among other things, as a relation of power". Mitchell, Picture Theory*, Op. Cit.*, p. 6.
[569] "Images, like histories and technologies, are our creations, yet also commonly thought to be 'out of our control'—or at least out of 'someone's' control, the question of agency and power being central to the way images work". *Loc. Cit.*
[570] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit,* p. 16.

The issue for the author is not to argue for the possibility of going beyond images but to "understand from within them how and to what extent they can take a hold on us inside some orders and some imaginaries in which images themselves are likewise trapped".[571] In summary, the abundance or excess, a word in itself signifying and implying an array of connotations, of images does not solely construct visuality. All this returns to the central point of this chapter: images of violence in Mexico are a complex problem that stems not only from their quantity nor a supposed correspondence to acts of violence. Images of violence exist in a paradoxically oppositional realm of visibility and invisibility.

Reducing the question of violence to their availability and reachability limits the scope of enquiry. It is not the images themselves that are the problem. Even if we see—either sense or even document—more and more images of violence in Mexico, this cannot assert that there are materially more or fewer images. It does, however, say something about the singular and social lives in the country that see, create, consume, witness, and *live with* the violence and cruelty they depict, the violences and cruelties exercised over other bodies. This implies the dual movement of vision and visuality with the imaginary and symbolic reflecting and impacting the subjective, the social and the visual in the mediation of and by violence and cruelty. We cannot, and should not, limit the scope of images of violence to the acts of violence, that is, not as a representation of violence that has happened.

> We must challenge the received opinion that this system drowns us in a flood of images in general, and images of horror in particular, thereby rendering us insensitive to the banalized reality of these horrors. This opinion is widely accepted because it confirms the traditional thesis that the evil of images consists in their very number, their profusion effortlessly invading the spellbound gaze and mushy brain of the multitude of democratic consumers of commodities and images.[572]

Jacques Rancière's sound critique unfolds the problems regarding images of violence, or horror, as he names them. He indicates the generalisation that, at the same time, in a way, is supposed to signify the sum of singular events, but not actually the event or its image in the singular, giving the semblance of *too many*. Moreover, Rancière's proclamation evidences the subjective characteristics of the 'spellbound gaze' and 'mushy brain' that our contemporary visuality seems to be facilitating. This idea returns to the relationship between power and visuality, to how power operates in and through images and visuality.

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[571] *Loc. Cit.*
[572] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator,* London, Verso, 2009, p. 96.

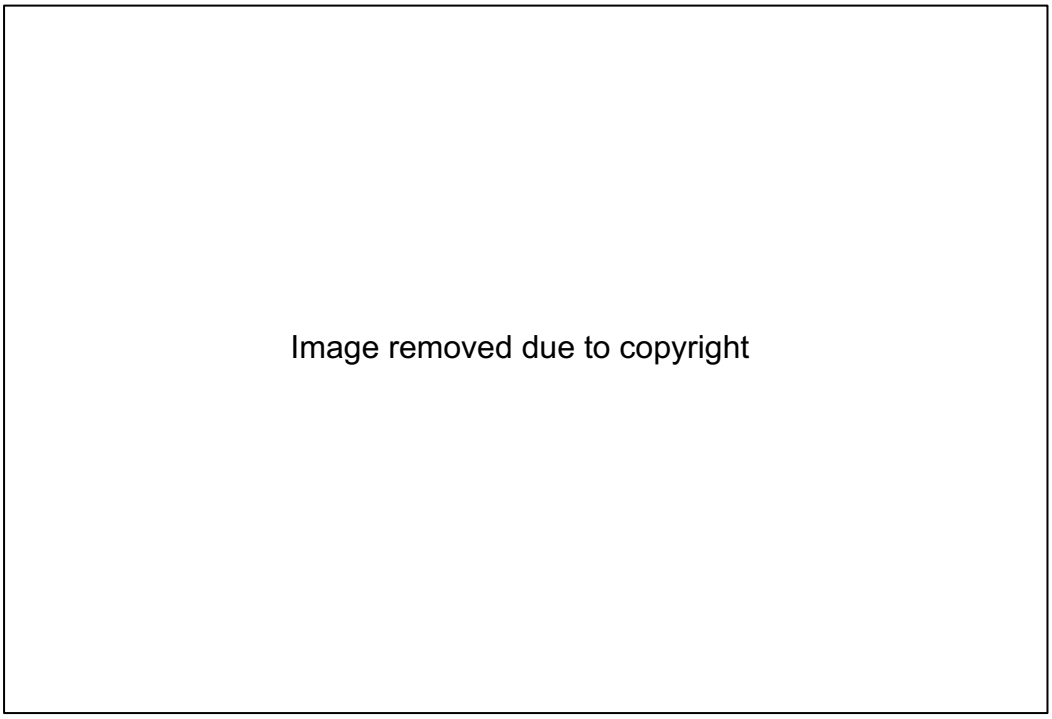

Image 1[573]

In 2011, thirty-five bodies were murdered and left, trucks and messages included, in the middle of the street in Veracruz. Be it one or 35 or hundreds of thousands, Mexico has too many dead, and too many disappeared to count. The numbers are insufficient because, in the first and obvious sense, even if represented in images, they cannot stand for the bodies or lack thereof, and two, because of the known lack of accurate statistics. This reflects the discussion on the abundance of images in that, even if parallel to an abundance of events and bodies, the task separates subject, body, and name. It does not restore and, instead, leads the discussion elsewhere.

As Reguillo suggests, "we count the dead, but it is a useless gesture because this does not restore their humanity, nor does it mend the tear the machine produces on its path".[574] Images are not only a fragment of a moment, a glimpse of a reality that has passed; they actively engage in the interlinked formation of the inner (subjective) and outer (social)

[573] Image can be found in: Manuel M. Cascante, "Abandonan 35 cadáveres en una concurrida avenida de Veracruz" (FROM, 15 April, 2022: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abcp-abandonan-cadaveres-concurrida-avenida-201109220000_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).
[574] Reguillo, Necromáquina. Cuando morir no es suficiente*, Op. Cit.,* p. 55.

worlds. They do so through an extensive array of signifiers and meanings that, on the one hand, touch on previously articulated elements of subjectivity and social life and, on the other, add, subtract, or displace these and configure them to sustain or preserve a particular power or order.

Image 1[575] speaks of the discarded bodies that stand in for the topography of cruelty in the country. This image, one of many of the same event, functions as a kaleidoscopic mirror of society that reflects the visual construction of society as well as the social construction of vision.[576] In a special issue of *Proceso* magazine titled "El sexenio de la muerte" (The six-year term of death), there is an up-close take of image 1. Afterwards, there is a brief essay by Juan Villoro about Felipe Calderón's term and legacy in office from the perspective of the war against the *narco*. Villoro argues that the only benefit that Calderón obtained from the military deployment was mediatic: "since late 2006, nothing else has been talked about. The red scoreboard of blood substituted the post-electoral debate".[577]

Villoro raises a crucial point to consider. On the one hand, it is true that since 2006, violence has taken hold of the media. This is one of the main problems that led to this project. On the other hand, whilst many argue that one of Calderón's [prominent] reasons to engage in this war was to restore political credibility after a questionable election, the sentence reads as if it was cause and effect. That may be so, but less as a claim for political legitimacy and more as an embodiment of power and violence. The war, seen from that perspective, did not necessarily "fail", as has been repeatedly stated. The war, more easily apprehended in the *après coup*, marked the installation of a regime of spectacular cruelty embodied by the political and economic administration of death and not merely one of legitimacy.

In image 2, which appeared in the aforementioned special number by *Proceso* magazine, we can witness how images and visuality are constructed and employed in and through circuits of fear as mechanisms at subjective and social levels. Image 2, set on two pages of the issue, gives a closer look at image 1. Whereas image 1 has a peculiar, lower quality tint that, taken from far away, suggests more about the scene, with the pyramid and the palm trees and the people behind them, the framing of image 2

[575] It is important to mention that images are not presented chronologically but, instead, articulating backwards and forwards—as is the nature of memory—the discourses and consequent subjective and social changes experienced with and through the production of violent images. The jump between this image and the former ones, which date to an earlier point in the war, does not attempt to represent the constellation of images produced but points to their fixation in Mexico's visual culture.
[576] Mitchell, Showing Seeing, *Op. Cit.,* p. 170.
[577] Juan Villoro, "El Presidente de la sangre", in Proceso, *El sexenio de la muerte,* p. 46.

recalls the tautologies of the visible mentioned earlier—the same event, with an additional disturbing proximity.

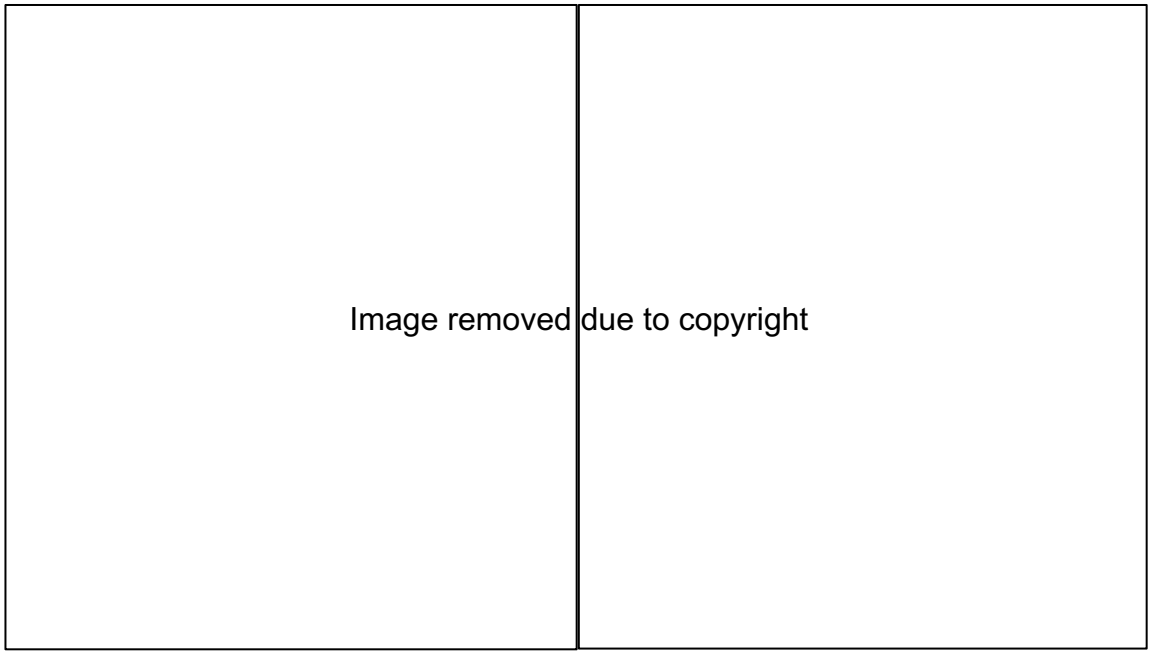

Image 2[578]

Image 2 speaks not only of the number of images or bodies. Both are apparent: this image suggests that many deaths had come before it, for this one to have arrived at an increasing number of bodies in an image.[579] It speaks of the amplification of the depth of field to hold the gaze over a specific dimension so that it has nowhere else to go over the bodies, here and there, on piles over piles, from one to another to the [long] text, and back.[580] It is saturated by death.

When facing and confronting the violence of the images, there is no single way to categorise them. Visuality, in its contemporary, mediated structure, may be *made up*

[578] Image(s) can be found in: Proceso, "El sexenio de la muerte. Memoria gráfica del horror", special issue, October 2013, pp. 42-43.
[579] As shown in previous images, there are not always as many bodies depicted in images. This tendency began to become more and more common as the years went by.
[580] "The point of view of images overly saturated with violence for them to be reduced to a single plane of the event" González de Araújo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 142.

of or *engage with* violences[581], and, in turn, violence is consistently acquiring a visualised aspect that affects the former. Hence, it is essential to differentiate and explore as many facets as possible of the problem independently. This chapter wishes to show that there is no single legibility and approximation to the problem of violent images.

In *Frames of war,* Butler explains that "rather than merely referring to acts of atrocity, the photograph builds and confirms these acts for those who would name them as such".[582] Here, the meeting of Rancière and Butler points to the ideas introduced earlier: the shadows of representation, interpretation and naming the acts of horror, cruelty or atrocity. For Butler, the frame—*framing*—is primordial: it works as a boundary to the image but also as a way of structuring the image itself.[583]

> The question for war photography thus concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows. The "how" not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well […] The photograph is not merely a visual image awaiting interpretation; it is itself actively interpreting, sometimes forcibly so.[584]

Whilst containing many crucial elements, Butler's quotation contains two noteworthy aspects for this discussion. First, the potential ability of the photograph to invoke (or not) a response, whether social, political or individual. It has been stressed earlier that neither the effects nor the responses to an image can be anticipated or foreseen. Second, the suggestion of metonymising the restoration of a body's subjective integrity in the image's registry. In other words, the idea that photographing a dead body would imply a restoration of a certain integrity. In the words of Butler, referring specifically to the photographs of Abu Ghraib, but that helps support the argument made here, "the photo cannot restore integrity to the body it registers".[585] Thus, when in front of images of dead bodies, violent or cruel deaths, speaking *for* the images, which may amount to speaking for the dead, would imply the iteration of violences.

Blair argues that a society is defined, in cultural terms, by its relation to death, "its occurrence, reception and symbolisation. In short, by its execution and representation".[586] Thus, Blair argues that the body is both the place of inscription of the violent ritual but also

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[581] The [violent] image is violent on uncountable accounts, as established in chapter one. It assaults, marks, tears, and ruptures, creating a spiral of horror, terror, distrust, and melancholy. More than ever, it is crucial differentiating violence from cruelty.
[582] Butler, Frames of War, *Op. Cit.*, p. 70.
[583] *Ibid,* p. 71.
[584] *Loc. Cit.*
[585] *Ibid.,* p. 78.
[586] Blair Trujillo, Muertes violentas, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 9-10.

a place that, rather than pertaining to a purely physical dimension, is where the inscriptions of violent death make it an object and a spectacle.[587]

We may believe to know perfectly well what we see, but *how* can we know that *if* we know that? What has led to such a familiarity with what death looks like so that we know how thirty-five dead bodies left on a busy avenue look? However, it is not only death. In Blair's terms, it already represents a certain death—decapitated, dismembered, massacred, and many other objectifications of death. So, how do we *know* death if we see it staged, spectacularised, and through the mediation of the image? This implies this image, all those that came before and those to come. This, too, comes back to Belting's question on how "the old, symbolic power of images seems to have faded, and death has become so abstract that the question of its meaning scarcely arises".[588]

Visuality and power

Violence is the impact of displacement or acting upon a body or situation. As established earlier by Jean-Luc Nancy, the irruption of the image suggests taking or extracting something materially and immaterially from the present tense and transforming it. Thus, beyond the initial violence of creating the image, the subsequent manipulation or use given to it afterwards may imply further violences. That is, the image may or may not contain apparent violences[589], but the more concrete question is how the image unleashes its violence through and to the subject. In Marie-José Mondzain's words:

> Because images are considered as subjects, they are suspected of being able to abuse their power. Here begins the source of many misunderstandings. In fact, each one of us has a complicity—if not an intimacy—with the force of violence; each of us has a certain familiarity with it that is not alien to the definition of life itself. Peace without force looks like death, and the force of life is built on reserves of violence. To speak of reserves is also to speak of resources and their withdrawal. In other words, it is only in the capacity to be violent that we must find the strength not to be violent. Violence is thus a power before it is an act.[590]

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[587] *Ibid.,* p. 48.
[588] Belting, *Op. Cit.*, p. 84
[589] This suggests a tangential question on whether images' frames are themselves the forces that contain the violences from irrupting.
[590] Marie-José Mondzain, "Can images kill?", in *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 36, no. 1, p. 24.

Mondzain confronts and displaces the binary discourse on violence, equating it to evilness—the argument of chapter two. Likewise, she situates the paradigm of the familiarity of the subject with both violence and the images, which overlap at times whilst pretending to be conditioned by the outside. The interaction of images with the subject is not a foreign or alien event: the subject is formed by images, the imaginary register and violences, the symbolic through language. This evidences one of the problems in Mexico ensuing from the contact with images of violence: the lack of language to analyse the constant, abundant and increasingly crueller array of images forming the visual landscape.

This problem can also be formulated through the question of the different operations and positions taking place *in* and *with* the image: the kaleidoscopic reflections of seeing and being seeing, taking and framing positions, zooming in and zooming out *from* the presumed core of the image. Analysing these seeing positions entails enquiring into the different ramifications of seeing, predominantly of our responsibility towards the visual construction of violence and the incorporation of discourses into our daily lexicon in a context such as Mexico's. That is, the discursive structures where these images enter reiterate the narratives that are taken over as standard. This is notable in the *narco* neologisms mentioned earlier. These questions inevitably lead to the issue of power and its many ways of operating.

According to Mirzoeff, visuality is a historically constructed project that derived instruments of domination and inequality through aesthetic justifications.[591] Visuality is not an arbitrary or new concept. It dates to the nineteenth century when visuality was employed as a resource to convey history.[592] Based on Foucault's phrase that power is war, "a war continued by other means"[593], Mirzoeff writes that "visuality is not war by other means: it is war".[594] Martínez Luna's proposition that visuality is that which makes vision into a language is significant, for it leads to examine the visual discourses of violence in Mexico.[595]

> Visuality is a practice that comprises information, images and ideas and that equips the subject able to articulate it with authority. It determines what is legitimate to look at and what is not. It comes from an exercise of authority that imposes determined consensus and leaves out other practices, bodies and

[591] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 84.
[592] *Loc. Cit.*
[593] Foucault, Power/Knowledge, *Op. Cit.,* p. 90.
[594] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The right to look. A counterhistory in visuality*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 6.
[595] For Martínez Luna, in line with this argument, given the particularities of visuality as a semiotic system and its own ways of knowledge production, it has specific relations with knowledge and power irreducible to those of language. Since the sphere of the imaginary is interwoven with reality and language, public exchanges, and the symbolic and affective life, it demands being addressed on its terms. Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 83.

> discourses in order to dominate them. The imagery production and consumption play a key role in the processes of subjectivation and constitution of the I in relation to the construction of the gaze, especially following the Lacanian theory, although it may very well be attended here in the interest of phenomenology to the study of the visual field.[596]

González de Araújo argues that the main instrument of power over the visible is the screen as a "sophisticated filter for subjectivation".[597] According to the author, the new political and economic managers of visibility drew from discursive models that, instead of creating processes of subjectivity—of conscience, memory, and liberty—reinforced processes of subjection. For her, the Cold War shifted this tendency, reinforcing pleasure and fear as hegemonic affective models of violent images. She locates this through a paradigm of visuality that carries on to our day: the coexistence of war images with "the Hollywood dream", reinforcing a logic of consumption and fear.[598]

> How is this visual, discursive, and affective reciprocity explained? Because the visibilisation of violence produced in a specific frame and well-located in reality (the one containing the screen of television of the frame of a newspaper's page) allows the contextualisation of fear and the channelling of human anguish by the mere fact of being. Thus, it allows assigning a contour and limits to the destructive instincts and the affects representing them. That is, locating them in a shared space and objectifying them in the distance brought by the point of view of a couch-spectator. Objectifying the violence of the world implies, precisely, the disaffection of its tensions and orientating the voidness of being a subject (the intrinsic tension of subjectivity) towards the promise of fulfilment and stability that the world of consumption offers.[599]

Brea works with the idea that it is not only that images—and vision—are constructed and determined socially, but they *are* the social, "that the archive of knowledge, power and desire that Foucault talked about is there".[600] Remarkably, Brea states that, as happens with the word, the image's precondition is its capacity of being shared. Thus, images are the archive of collective memory. The archive construction is significant in addressing what Brea calls the globalised image-world and its relation to discourses and power because, in today's *image-world,* those who have the power produce the narrative codes:

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[596] *Ibid.,* pp. 85-86.
[597] González de Araújo, *Op. Cit.,* p. 143.
[598] *Ibid.,* pp. 143-144.
[599] *Ibid.,* pp. 144-145.
[600] Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro, "El pensamiento anticipado. Tiempo y visualidad en la obra de José Luis Brea", in Mayer Foulkes, Benjamín, *ed., los cuerpos de la imagen,* Mexico City, Editorial 17, Centro de la Imagen, 2018, p. 168.

> Meanings are not negotiated; they are imposed. We know the meaning of an event before seeing it. We cannot see other than this limited way. Escaping the bubble does not mean doing it towards the "reality" but to another reign of the image.[601]

Considering that Brea sustains that seeing results from a cultural construction, an approximation to seeing and its cultural construction cannot be sustained in a single discipline or phenomenic 'purity'. The *acts* of seeing, being that they are conditioned, constructed, inscribed culturally and politically connotated, imply more than *active* seeing, they encompass:

> The wide repertoire of modes of doing related to looking and being looked at, seeing and being seen, monitoring and being monitored, producing images and disseminating them or contemplating and perceiving them… and the articulation of power relations, domination, privilege, submission, control… that it all entails. Those are, in effect, the issues that visual studies must see and deal with.[602]

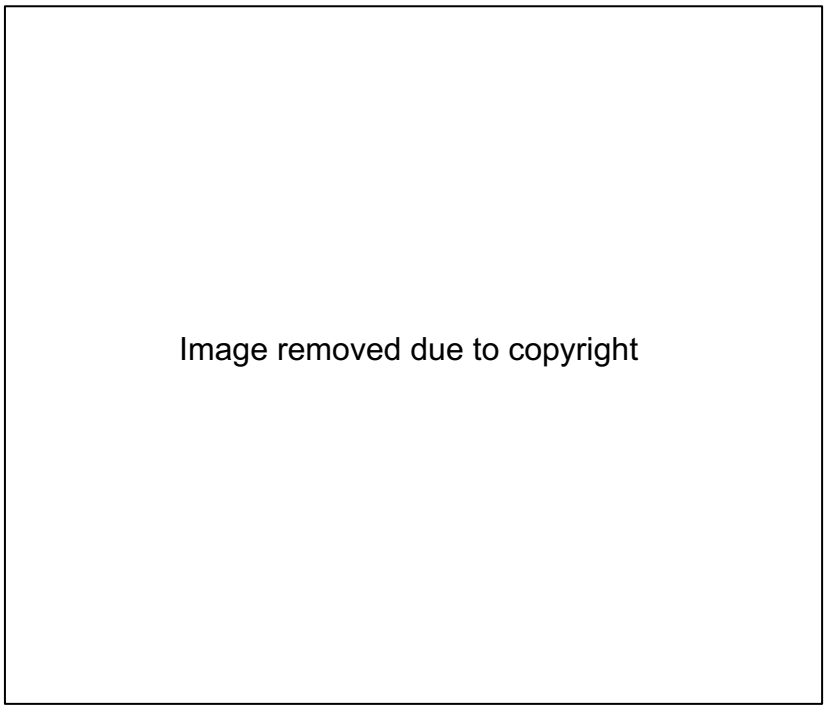

Image 3[603]

[601] José Luis Brea, Estudios visuales: la epistemología de la visualidad en la era de la globalización, España, Ediciones AKAL, 2005, p. 159.
[602] Brea, Los estudios visuales: por una epistemología política de la visualidad, *Op. Cit*, p. 7.
[603] Image can be found in: Antonio Ortega Ávila, "El hallazgo de 12 cuerpos decapitados horroriza a México" (FROM, 21 February, 2022: https://elpais.com/diario/2008/08/30/internacional/1220047208_850215.html).

In August 2008, the international section of El País reported "the finding of 12 decapitated bodies that horrifies Mexico" in Yucatán, south Mexico.[604] The news report, noticeably eloquent, narrates the sequence of the events. The bodies were found after an anonymous call to the reporters of Televisión Azteca (one of the two major multimedia conglomerates in Mexico). Reporters found "11 cadavers, stacked and bound by hands and feet".[605] The article mentions the presence of tattoos as a relevant fact. The tattoos, as explained by the then-governor of Yucatan, were images of the Santa Muerte—a popular Mexican figure representing death as a cult's motive. The article remarks that the Catholic Church does not recognise the Santa Muerte and that "amongst its devotees, there are delinquents, police members, or poor people".[606] There is no mention of the names of the victims nor the perpetrators—except an insinuation that they were "*sicarios* [hitmen] from the Cartel del Golfo or one [cartel] from the north".[607]

Building on Zavala's argument in chapter two, his thoughts in this chapter suggest that visuality has been indispensable for the discourse on violence and the *narco* in Mexico and how a visuality of violence and violent visuality affects subjectivity and the social bond. On the one hand, due to the subjective constitution concerning images and the historical formation of subjectivity through power relations. On the other hand, the modes of seeing and being seen are likewise constructed through discourses that rely heavily on images constituting a visuality reiterating these discourses, especially in the advent of digital media. It is notable within the diffuse official discourse that creates the terror and horror needed to sustain an imaginary of the violent other and that would gain public acceptance as a discourse of war. Focusing this last point on marginalised, defined as abject, criminalised subjectivities as shown in the previous image, will be developed further in the following section.

Image 3 features a "stack of decapitated bodies" that has "horrified Mexico", as the article is titled. Even when the bodies are in the centre of the image, they are framed with the shadow of what appears to be a soldier, dressed all in black, on the right, and a group of men, perhaps government employees, with their backs to the bodies, on the left. Sitting on top of the bodies—some naked and some with what appears to be blankets thrown over them—are the typical yellow evidence markings of a crime scene. The uncovered bodies

[604] *Loc. Cit.*
[605] *Loc. Cit.*
[606] *Loc. Cit.*
[607] *Loc. Cit.*

are likewise suggestive of their bareness, of their being stripped of subjectivity compared to the soldier's complete cover in black.

The absence of any identification of the victims through naming is not uncommon. On the contrary, the media rarely names the massacred bodies, even when police or forensic investigations could provide the name and articles could be updated. Nevertheless, this article stands out for giving more information than the news reports to come in the following years. The presence of [a type of] tattoos is attributed to an unrecognised cult, among whom there are "delinquents" or "poor people". This is an example of the criminalisation and, consequently, dispensability of certain types of bodies that are the object of the discourse of the (unimportant) dead in Mexico: the brown, poor men with an associated aesthetic to them.

It is not clear if the horror alluded to by El País stems from the event or the circulation of this image.[608] However, this image and the text that accompanies it returns to the discussion above on the implications of a violent visuality with the configuration of different subjectivities. It has to do, as Mitchell recognises, with questioning the power and agency in pictures "to specify the relation between pictures and discourse understood, among other things, as a relation of power".[609]

How, exactly, can visuality constitute a power apparatus? From a Foucauldian perspective, power, through discourse, operates through a pretence of truth: "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth".[610] For Foucault, power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, and its registration of truth. In the end, he says, "we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are bearers of the specific effects of power".[611]

Mondzain recognises this and presents the problem of visuality and power through the social configurations it aims to affect. The visible, she says, "touches us insofar as it deals with the power of desire and obliges us to find the means to love or to hate collectively. Visibility encourages minds and bodies to have a constructive or destructive dialogue with such violence".[612] Following image 3, taken and reproduced in 2008, eventually, there was

[608] An article from El Universal was titled "Appearance of a wave of psychosis in Yucatán because of decapitated". Yazmín Rodríguez, "Surge ola de psícosis en Yucatán por decapitados" (FROM, 23 February, 2022: https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/534113.html).
[609] Mitchell, Picture Theory*, Op. Cit.*, p. 6.
[610] Foucault, Power/Knowledge*. Op. Cit.*, p. 93.
[611] *Ibid.,* p. 94.
[612] Mondzain, *Op. Cit.,* p. 25.

no need to explain these deaths; they were inscribed in a discourse on the war on drugs, almost *a priori* "destined to a certain mode of living or dying", following Foucault's quotation above.

As alluded to before, Mexico's history is one of structural racism. Federico Navarrete argues that the Spanish domination created a caste system that distinguished the populations based on their continental origin and lineage—favouring Europeans and their descendants. This allowed the exploitation of most people of American origin, classified as "indio"—"indian" or indigenous people—and enslaved Africans.[613] The imposition of Catholicism further resulted in a system that multiplied differences and distinctions.[614] The 1824 Constitution eliminated the classification of Mexican citizens by their cast or continental origin. However, "it preserved gender distinctions that excluded women from the citizenship and the religious intolerance that prohibited any creed not catholic".[615]

According to Navarrete, the abolition of legal distinctions between groups did not eradicate the social differences established and deepened throughout the centuries.[616] The revolutions and social transformations entailed rearranging the elites and classifying people of diverse origins as "mestizos". "Following the triumph of liberalism, the country entered a process of capitalist modernisation that incorporated an increasing number of people of diverse origins".[617] However, even throughout all these social transformations, Navarrete maintains, the ascending elites sought ways of "whitening" themselves, phenotypically and socially.[618]

Navarrete sustains that in Mexico and other countries in Latin America, skin colour "serves as an 'index' of social privilege. Following Charles Peirce's definition, this means that, when reading and classifying people's pigmentation, we establish a causal relationship between this and their origin and position in society".[619] This, Navarrete insists, is not just symbolic—based on analogies or resemblances—but causal: "they are perceived as a direct

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[613] Federico Navarrete Linares, "Blanquitud vs. blancura, mestizaje y privilegio en México de los siglos XIX a XXI, una propuesta de interpretación", in *Estudios Sociológicos de El Colegio de México,* no. 40, p. 124.
[614] *Ibid.,* pp. 124-125.
[615] *Ibid.,* p. 126.
[616] *Loc. Cit.*
[617] *Ibid.,* p. 127.
[618] Notably, Navarrete notices that Mexico's hierarchisation based on skin colour and ethnic origin is as notorious and profound as other countries such as Brazil and Colombia, who, on the contrary, did not experience as many and as radical social transformations as Mexico. *Loc. Cit.*
[619] *Ibid.,* p. 139.

result and as a confirmation of prevalent inequalities and they easily also become an efficient cause to generate new distinctions and discriminations".[620]

> In short, when we see a person with darker skin colour, it is easier to make a causal association, yet not necessarily a true one, of their pigmentation with a racialised identity, "india" [indigenous] or "negra" [black], that is at the same time usually associated with social and cultural characteristics (poverty, marginality, lack of education); according to the inferred causality it is easier to treat them differently, or even discriminate them, in a way that the original differentiations and reproduced and deepened.[621]

Following Navarrete's thoughts, at the beginning of the war against the *narco,* the field was ripe for planting signifiers based on other older ones. The deaths, the bodies, and even their implicit preservation in the images of their deaths were attributed to their supposed (real or not) criminality, skin colour, social class, and overall appearance. They became a metonymy in the visuality of violence in Mexico, an iteration of bodies that came to incarnate what they were told to be by force of discourse repetition. Articles such as the one mentioned above from El País began constructing the conflict's subjects visually and discursively. Following Navarrete's arguments, they departed from the material or concrete traces such as physical marks and ways of living to construct the other symbolically through words, signifiers, and neologisms we witness today.

At the same time, discourses, through their production of truth, require a structure—much like cruelty does and will be developed in the following section—which can be considered through Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* or apparatus. This is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid".[622] Christian León, while analysing visual studies from a Foucauldian perspective, states that subject, object and visual field *are* all constructions of power.[623]

A critical differentiation begins taking place in Mexican media representation. In earlier years—even dating back to the period between the 1960s onwards, developed in chapter one and the interlude—the articles leaned heavily towards words. We can assume

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[620] *Loc. Cit.*
[621] *Loc. Cit.*
[622] Foucault, Power/Knowledge*, Op. Cit.,* p. 194.
[623] Christian León, "Regímenes de poder y tecnologías de la imagen. Foucault y los estudios visuales (Power regimes and technologies of the image. Foucault and visual studies)*",* in *AKADEMOS*, vol. 1, p. 44

that the few articles that had images were included following their own textual avenues for instilling fear. Recently, however, there have been images which may only have a few words given to them. Not only were they successful in implementing signifiers, but images of violence—with their own set of rules and implications, which we have not become adept in developing and socialising, as Brea and Mitchell argue—have become their own mode of documenting, categorising, and producing imaginary and symbolic effects.

León's emphasis is on the visual device or apparatus working through and towards technological operations in which power "increases its efficiency by subjugating bodies to a multi-centred gaze, maximising its discretion through an increasing disappearance of the visual field".[624] He refers to Donna Haraway's claim that "this is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation".[625] A complementing thought can be found in Gilles Deleuze's Foucault seminar when he states that visibilities are never hidden, we (every period) see what we make seeable.[626]

At one point, the sentence "to see is to believe" was repeatedly uttered. With the development of technologies that can manipulate images, this has since fallen from that position of truth and belief. However, in Mexico in 2006, this sentence coincided with the increasing visualisation of violence—or the visual-turned-violent. The said and the unsaid became entangled in a traitorous all-seen fiction—the conviction that we can believe and *know* all there is to know in what we see. Violence was upgraded to its category of truth as we began *seeing* it and thus believing or trusting its existence; it was only real when shown. Of course, this all-visible, all-seen, unsurprisingly veils even what is *believed* to be the most apparent as a *dispositif* of violence.

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[624] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[625] Donna Haraway, *Simians, cyborgs, and women. The reinvention of nature,* New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 188.
[626] "[…] visibilities are never hidden. Every period sees what it can see, every period makes seeable all that it can make seeable. Only, watch out!—while they are never hidden, visibilities are nonetheless never immediately given. Up to here, we're good, right? It's even a kind of tracing". Gilles Deleuze, "Foucault", lecture 3, 1985, p. 20.

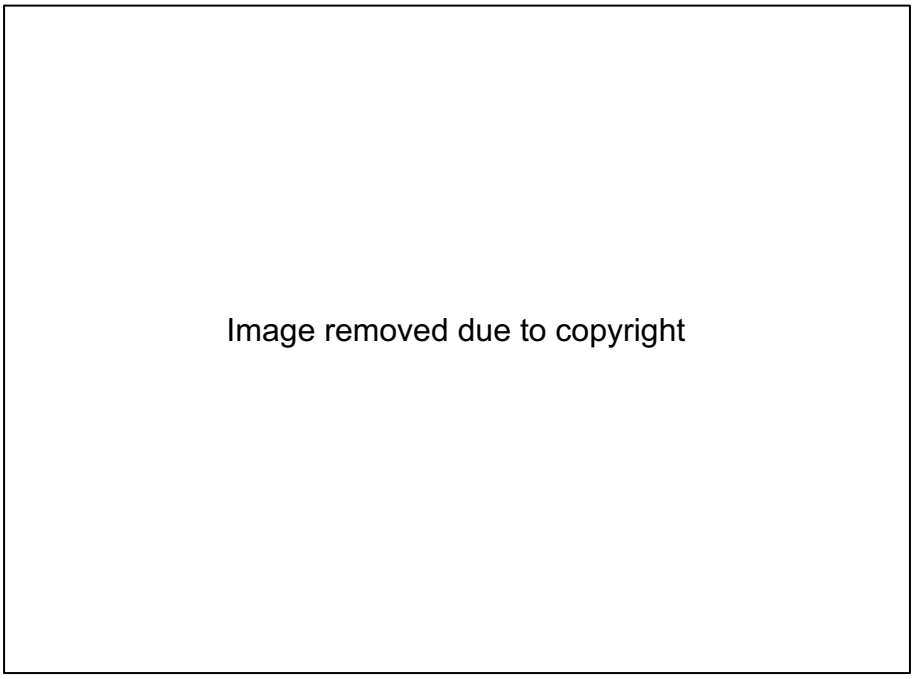

Image 4[627]

In the analysis of these images, two images of the same event[628], the appearance of traces that are framing the conflict is conspicuous.[629] This framing *marked* the bodies, backwards and forward in time, into who would be the lost lives—criminals and collateral damages—by, generally, being of a particular social class, phenotype, region, aesthetics, or by being associated with others that bear these traits. Those who resemble but are not directly proven to *be* a part of a crime were catalogued as collateral damage. The war against drug trafficking was always one against the general public—the population at large, as a way to discipline and control—but mainly against a particular type of subjectivities—the abject, marginalised, peripheric subjectivities.[630] However, the question is, when some subjectivities are categorised as dispensable or abjected, what happens to others that

[627] Close-up of image 1 that can be found in: El País, "Hallados al menos 11 cuerpos decapitados al sureste de México" (FROM, 21 February, 2022: https://elpais.com/internacional/2008/08/29/actualidad/1219960808_850215.html?event_log=oklogin).
[628] The image of the image, perhaps.
[629] The traces refer, too, to Brea's conception of images as the archive of collective memory.
[630] Even if there have been incidents against upper-class members, these have been rare and have been overly magnified in the media.

sustain the bonds that push others to the outskirts of the bond, but are necessary for sustaining it?

Although primarily directed against certain subjects and groups, necropolitics in Mexico has affected the social bonds to such an extent that the war—its events, news reports, images, hear-says and rumours on social media and instant messengers and its manifestations of violence and cruelty—has become embedded in the subjective and social fabrics of the entire country. Violence is now considered—whether in an imaginary or factual sense, as both are no longer distinguishable—a widespread, profound condition of living in Mexico. Even when there are still corners, households or subjects that have not been directly and materially confronted by it, violence and, even more troubling, cruelty have become bonds of sociality.

If power, through discourse, functions on the pretence of [a] truth and if mediatic powers can turn everything that passes through them into truth[631], then we are dealing not only with the apparent, visible undertakings and effects of a "war". It is a whole structure forming a regime of visuality of violence whose purpose is, amongst others, to discipline bodies through the configuration of a social truth sustained in the repetition of image-text discourses.[632] It has to do with, as Foucault argues, a power that is no longer deemed in terms of sovereignty.

> [This new type of power] has been a fundamental instrument in the constitution of industrial capitalism and of the type of society that is its accompaniment. This non-sovereign power, which lies outside the form of sovereignty, is disciplinary power […] But at the same time, the theory of sovereignty, and the organisation of a legal code centred upon it, have allowed a system of right to be superimposed upon the mechanisms of discipline in such a way as to conceal its actual procedure, the element of domination inherent in its techniques, and to guarantee to everyone, by virtue of the sovereignty of the State, the exercise of his proper sovereign rights.[633]

This last quotation resonates profoundly with Calderón's discourse regarding the war. In 2007, shortly after declaring war on drug trafficking, Calderón attended an event in Michoacán, where the "war" began, in military cap and jacket to render tribute to the soldiers, marines and police in their efforts to stop drug trafficking operations. Here, he announced that the fight "is not an easy one nor will it be speedy, it will take a long time and imply

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[631] Navarro Fuentes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 420.
[632] This aligns with Mirzoeff's argument that visuality is a historic project that has served to instrumentalise an aesthetic justification of domination and inequality. Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 84.
[633] Foucault, Power/Knowledge*, Op. Cit.,* p. 105.

enormous resources of the Mexicans, even the loss of life".[634] Of course, this meant particularly the loss of *certain* lives.

Cruelty and its theatres

For Argentinian psychoanalyst Fernando Ulloa, cruelty always requires a sociocultural device or apparatus. For cruelty to become such, both the executioner's violence and the victim's helplessness must be framed within a sociocultural device or apparatus backed and installed by intellectual accomplices and operating with impunity.[635] Ulloa distinguishes between different levels or approaches to cruelty. First, "the cruel"[636], without a manifested subject of the action, lives amongst society without scandal, even colluding. This does not imply that in "the cruel" there is not an intellectually responsible subject. However, the cruel may acquire a statute of custom in which victims live with intimidation that remains inadvertent. Thus, "the cruel" makes culture—a real culture of mortification.[637]

The second approach implies the passage from "the cruel" to cruelty. Cruelty, as the implementation of an aggressive and hate-filled condition, is a cultural event that requires a form of politics that fosters it.[638] The third approach is named by Ulloa "the event of cruelty", referring to one's conscience of the personal disposition to the cruelty that, in different degrees, inhabits every subject. It is the passage from the intrapsychic latency of the cruel to the ethical assumption of one's disposition to cruelty as a position of becoming conscious of.[639]

In a book dedicated to the thought of Fernando Ulloa, Ana Fernández states that "the cruel scene can also be thought of with three interchangeable positions. The one that actively exercises cruelty, the one who is 'object' of cruel practices and those who stare in

[634] Claudia Herrera and Ernesto Martínez, "Vestido de militar, Calderón rinde 'tributo' a las fuerzas armadas", in *La Jornada,* January 3, 2007. The whole article can be found at: https://www.jornada.com.mx/2007/01/04/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol.
[635] Fernando Ulloa, "Notas para una clínica de crueldad" (FROM, 12 January, 2015: https://www.imagoclinica.com/psicoanalisis/notas-para-una-clinica-de-la-crueldad/).
[636] In the Spanish version, the adjective cruel is preceded by a neutral article.
[637] *Loc. Cit.*
[638] *Loc. Cit.*
[639] *Loc. Cit.*

a terrified state as accomplices assuming that next time it will be their turn or that, fortunately, it was not them this time".[640] The cruel scene can be further developed through the case of torture to explore the relationship between subjective positions and image.

Many authors employ the term theatre to situate the spectacularity and representation present in the torment. It dates to Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. As Derrida sustains, the theatre of cruelty is not merely a representation; it is life itself, insomuch as life is unrepresentable.[641] Taking this argument to the problem of violent and cruel images, we can inscribe the "exhibitionist dimension of photographs" in an intensely horrifying theatre of cruelty.[642]

Conversely, Colombian artist José Alejandro Restrepo talks about the violence that takes pleasure in causing as much pain and damage as possible towards the defenceless other as a theatre of horror. He conceives horror as a political exercise that operates through a rupture in meaning while planting incredulity and fear to disseminate a didactic message.[643] More than that, it has a ritualistic component in which the destruction of the bodies goes through a "meditated staging to potentiate its signs in writing".[644]

While Restrepo and Blair situate their research and knowledge in Colombia, their arguments are significant for Mexico. The violences, cruelties and staging of the bodies are undeniably similar. These thoughts are present in Franco's examination of the cadavers in Colombia as vehicles for the transmission of messages both to the civilian population and to the enemy.[645] Moreover, she observes that "such practices passed with the drug traffic into Mexico, where cruelty is at its most extreme and where the expressive use of the cadaver has become common practice, a form of macabre theatre addressed not only to rivals but also to the public".[646]

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[640] Ana M. Fernández, "Grupos de familia: de la crueldad, sus linajes y sus coartadas", in Taber, Beatriz, *Pensando Ulloa,* Buenos Aires, Libros del Zorzal, 2005, p. 75.
[641] "Life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation". Jacques, Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 234.
[642] Miriam Jerade, "La pena de muerte: El teatro de la crueldad y la imaginación soberana", in *Signos filosóficos,* vol. XXII, no. 43, p. 136.
[643] José Alejandro Restrepo, *Cuerpo gramatical, Cuerpo, arte y violencia,* Bogota, 2006, Universidad de los Andes, p. 20.
[644] *Ibid.,* pp. 20-21.
[645] Franco, Cruel Modernity*, Op. Cit.*, p. 14.
[646] *Ibid.,* p. 15.

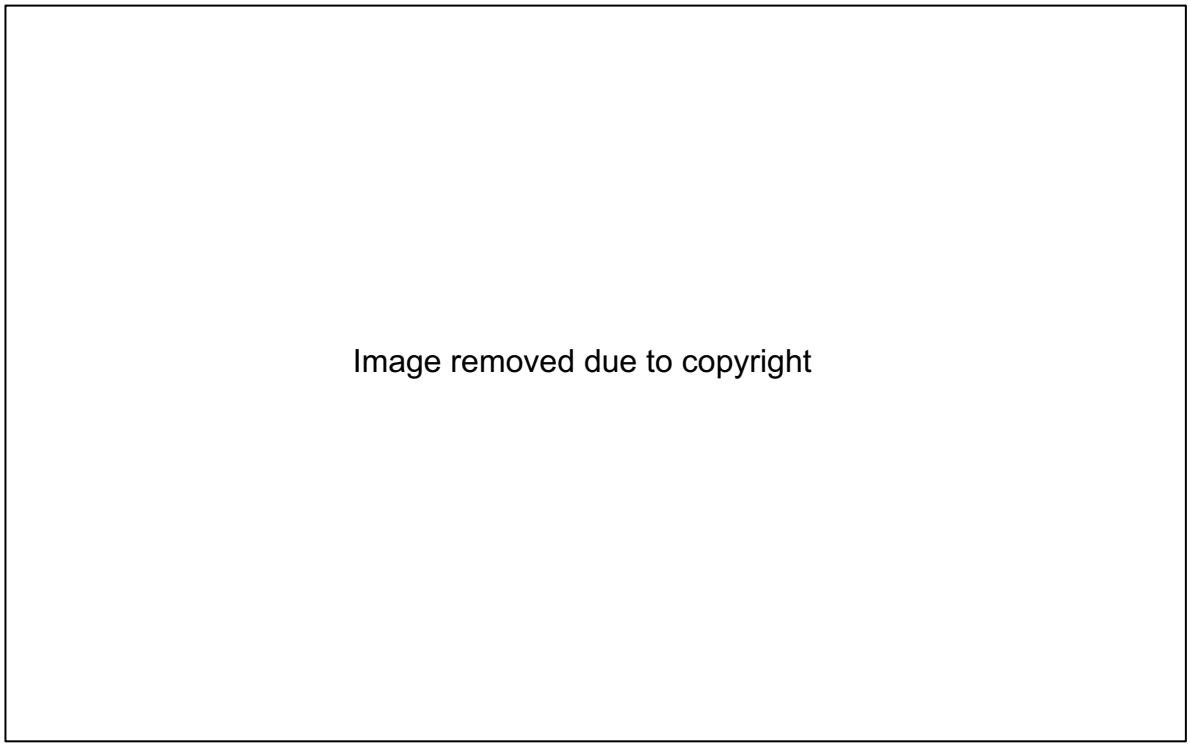

Image 5[647]

Pascal Quignard says that "every power is a theatre".[648] Then, thinking of the theatrical operations of power, the performative, visual, spectacular turnings of power are emphasised. It likewise resumes the discussion of power and confronts it with the events of torture, execution, and murder staged as public acts. Herein lies the problem of the visual register of staging. The spectacle is at the core of the experience of torment, as pointed out by Foucault, and is sustained by its mediatisation.

Segato, mentioned in the interlude, has named the practices and acts that "teach, accustom, and program subjects to transform the living and its vitality into things" as pedagogies of cruelty.[649] Thinking of this idea in relation to images becomes suggestive because, as Segato writes next, these pedagogies teach killing in an un-ritualised way, "a

[647] Image can be found in: Diario Respuesta, "policia [*sic*.]" (FROM, 22 April, 2022: https://issuu.com/diariorespuesta/docs/policia13_20110417_093510/1). The image in question includes pp. 12-13.
[648] Pascal Quignard, *El sexo y el espanto*, Buenos Aires, El Cuenco de Plata, 2005, p. 38.
[649] Rita Laura Segato, "Pedagogías de la crueldad El mandato de la masculinidad (fragmentos)" (FROM, 15 October, 2021: https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/9517d5d3-4f92-4790-ad46-81064bf00a62/pedagogias-de-la-crueldad).

death that leaves hardly any residue in place of the deceased".[650] From Blair's anthropologic perspective, she approaches violence through the symbolic dimensions of pain, suffering and cruelty. For Blair, these dimensions are not completely visible but are very important insomuch as they "function through a *mise en scène* of complicated rituals involving the victim, aggressor, and more often than not the spectator".[651]

The display of massacred bodies has been instrumental in the interests of power. However, the summons to see, the call to the masses to witness, is undoubtedly bolstered to reinforce the message while deviating towards creating another regime of visibility and control over the bodies. Violent and cruel deaths are not just mediatised to have an impact. They are not just instrumentalised to convey a meaning. Through this necrovisuality, they are configuring uncanny spaces that bring together the familiar in their most grotesque, ritualised, disconcerting manner.

From this perspective, there is a *mise-en-scène* of horror, a grammatic of death that configures visuality in Mexico. Diéguez uses the term *necrotheatre* to develop the intricate iconographic register of the broken and post-suffering body.[652] According to her, this is the body that "has been objected to the most atrocious acts and that when exposed to the public gaze can no longer be considered a suffering being, but a cadaver-body that exposes the traces of pain and bodily agony".[653]

> The exposed bodies in public spaces in Mexico, as it happened in Colombia, are subjected to what Foucault proposed […] as a "semio-technique of punishments", as a producer of a "new anatomy through which the body, again, but in a new form, will become the main character".[654] The extreme punishment exercised through torture is expressed, as Foucault reminds us, by way of representations; therein lies the spectacular use of the body after being submitted to the utmost suffering.[655]

Even though image 4 is taken from a *nota roja* journal, its implications for the concept of *necrotheatre* are notable. The image on the right-hand page, within image 4, demonstrates what seems to be a push to exceed the ways of administering death, the defilement of the body, and the destruction of any identifiable trait of subjectivity. All this

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[650] *Loc. Cit.*
[651] Elsa Blair, "El espectáculo del dolor, el sufrimiento y la crueldad", in *Controversia,* no. 178, p. 84.
[652] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.*, p 190.
[653] *Loc. Cit.*
[654] The complete quotation by Foucault is "It is this semio-technique of punishments, this 'ideological power' which, partly at least, will remain in suspense and will be superseded by a new political anatomy, in which the body, once again, but in a new form will be the principal character". Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish. The birth of prison,* New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 103.
[655] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 199.

conveys one of the most used relatable symbols—at least in the Western world. The body of a man, under which the article reads "limitless cruelty", was skinned, his hands cut off, and one of them arranged to sign the peace and love symbol. For Nuria Carton de Grammont, these types of images, leaked to the media, show an operational capacity to degrade the cadaver *ante mortem* and, or *postmortem*, to create terror installations.[656]

> The skinned cadaver of a man, whose skin was detached from the waist to the head, was found next to the Puente de los Lobos [Bridge of the Wolves] in Tepic, Nayarit, the morning of April 16, 2011. This was the third one in two weeks. However, the hitmen mutilated the hands of this body, and one of the extremities was placed over the chest, whilst the other was left in the genital area, forming the sign of "peace and love". This type of terror installation, positioned "mockingly and even artistically", according to a news report, is continuously repeated in other squares of the republic. These stagings have been mediatised as a common referent of the violence crisis engulfing the country. In this case, the scene is violence that is represented, and that constructs an epistemology of terror.[657]

A colour version of image 5 is present on the cover of the publication, along with the title "Manic Hitmen. A skinned cadaver was sat next to a bridge in Nayarit". The words used to signify images such as this one are, in the same way the image was treated, embellished and exaggerated. Instead of providing the reader-spectator with a hiatus or an excision where the word could mean and ground the image, they reinforce one another by saying nothing. In saying nothing and exacerbating the Real-ness of the image with vacuous signifiers, we transit avenues of *jouissance,* disgust, abjection, morbid curiosity, anguish, and horror. The material and intellectual questioning of what we see, what it means, and *why* these images are shown are relayed to the background.

Herein lies the general intention of situating visuality as the structure where these violences circulate, stagnate, provoke, contain, or explode. Furthermore, when violence gives way to cruelty, it becomes implicated in subjective and social configurations. Differentiating these events as parts of the visual landscape is crucial in that—it cannot be said enough—they shape—in our increasingly visual world—our knowledges and approximations of the self, the other, and the world. It begins pulling the threads of the equally violent forces operating through the crevices of visuality and the subjects.

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[656] Nuria Carton de Grammont, "La violencia en escena: Cuerpo, narcotráfico y espacio público en el México contemporáneo" (FROM, 10 May, 2023: http://journals.openedition.org/alhim/5295).
[657] *Loc. Cit.*

> The question then becomes: How does this visual production result in a murderous passion or a fusional annihilation? Is the visible merely in the service of a violent desire, or can it be symbolically treated? In other words, is the image a power that cannot be symbolized by speech, or is it, on the contrary, the space of the possible cohabitation of our desires? The visible touches us insofar as it deals with the power of desire and obliges us to find the means to love or to hate collectively. Visibility encourages minds and bodies to have a constructive or destructive dialogue with such violence.[658]

The social bond created by discourse, by the word *directed to* the other, is the structure for the message(s) to be enunciated.[659] Visuality, as a discourse, can be understood "as a particular knowledge of the world that shapes how the world is understood and in which things are made within it".[660] The weaving of the social bond and visuality through power operations are built on discourses that depend on the pretence of truth.[661] Hence, if we are witnessing the tear of the social bond by the profound, piercing acts of cruelty, then the question is how and where to locate the dissemination and integration of cruelty into the social bond in order to forge others. Situating cruelty within or as a constitutive part of a sociocultural apparatus or device points towards this end: to situate visuality as a discursive structure of the sociocultural device upon which cruelty relies to operate.

However, it is significant to state, similarly to Operation Condor and the Dirty Wars addressed in chapter one, that a component of secrecy enables the apparatus of cruelty. Many images, such as image 5, are not necessarily widespread through conventional media; instead, they are localised in national or local *nota roja* journals. Some images are known more through what has been written and whispered about them than by seeing them. This leads to the premise that not only what is directly seen contributes to visuality.

Notably, in terms of the cruelty exercised over men and women, the abject stagings of the bodies, their mortification and humiliation, and the rumours, voices, and whispers that signal an image's existence, these constitute a bond where the perhaps unseen image circulates. There is an image that can be found online[662] depicting four human heads placed near the edge of the windshield on top of the hood of a truck. Three heads touch each other,

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[658] Mondzain, *Op. Cit.,* p. 25.
[659] "Enunciation denotes the practice of uttering something in a context, while the enoncé is the basic unit of discourse". Traue, B., Blanc, M., Cambre, C., "Visibilities and Visual Discourses: Rethinking the Social With the Image", in *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 25(4), p. 329.
[660] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 96.
[661] Foucault, Power/Knowledge*, Op. Cit.,* p. 93.
[662] One version of the image can be found here: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elmundo/4-206609-2012-10-29.html. Discretion is advised.

resting one next to the other. On the windshield, a written message read, "[the] last letter captures and executes devastating murderers". On the hood, there are several painted letters "z".[663]

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo names the letters on the hood as "a pun on the name of the executioners that suggests these four men, all with their eyes closed, are just sleeping".[664] According to the Blog del Narco (Blog of the Narco), the message from the criminal organisation "The Zetas" implied that these young men who were decapitated were responsible for a massacre that was executed earlier that day.

> The beheaded men were between the ages of eighteen and twenty years old. Incredulous friends, however, reported that they were university students who earned good grades, were popular, and showed no signs of being sicarios […] Many believe that the thugs made a mistake […] Nothing indicated that he and his companions would engage in a massacre. Nonetheless, Durango's district attorney carried out sodium rhodizonate tests on the young men's bodies, which disclosed they had fired weapons hours before being decapitated.[665]

Another photograph shows the same scene. However, the heads appear to have been re-arranged. Not only are the positions different, but one pair of eyes is now open, and it appears that the heads were moved—even though it is difficult to know or be sure. It is possible to suggest that this is the first photograph and that the scene was later modified for another photograph. Rather than focusing on which one was the original staging and by which circumstances it was decided to re-shape it, one can argue that both the settings and the circulated images produce a strong impression. Images like these are hard to see and harder to communicate. They exceed words. However, their circulation has also been predominantly verbal rather than visually appearing in major outlets. These images have to be searched for—and can be found—when, for instance, encountering their mention in an article such as Saldaña-Portillo's.

The arrangement of the dead—emphasising the cruelty of the pain inflicted upon the bodies and the disposition of the remains after their death—has to do with the communication of punitive messages for Diéguez. This grammatic of power and horror inscribed in the body was mentioned earlier. In the theatres of death or *necrotheatre*, according to Diéguez, "the staging takes a form not only by the exposed corporal remains.

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[663] María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States,* U.S., Duke University Press, 2016, p. 247.
[664] *Loc. Cit.*
[665] Blog del Narco, *Dying for the Truth: Undercover Inside the Mexican Drug War,* U.S.*,* Blog del Narco, 2012, p. 97.

A whole spectacular construction of the act of giving death, searching to generate terrifying effects is produced".[666] However, there too is a necessity of displaying imaginaries that "subscribe and communicate determined purposes".[667] This goes in line with the analysis made by Ovalle of different images of violence in Mexico, who suggests that:

> [In these images] the naturalised and ritualised forms of violent death are identifiable. The messages and codes deposited in the territory where the violent deaths associated with the *narcotráfico* [drug-trafficking] endure over the bodies that become a "place", a "scenery" of execution of the violent ritual. The dead bodies of the *narcotráfico* are understood as messengers of terror covered in significations.[668]

As noted by Ovalle, the message is not directed only to the enemies—other criminal groups or the government. It is also directed to the citizens "establishing the power held by these groups".[669] The repetition and virulence of the images lead to questioning whether these occurrences have acquired a mimetic-performative-exemplary usage. We can observe that the increasing production of deaths and images—perhaps due to the digital turn as of 2008—corresponded to a growing technical possibility, staging capacities, consumption, and reproduction that, in turn, enhances cruelty. It is impossible to say if it was a direct cause and effect or a parallel, yet not entirely unrelated process, like many social manifestations. From the perspective of the message—following Ovalle's quotation—perhaps the image came to take the place of the inscription of a visual—and textual, at times—message directed to those in and outside of the social bond.

The image as a message directed to the other marks a significant problem in that no one is outside the constructed visuality—or the violence lived in the country—that likewise makes the social bond. Consequently, there are singular and social responsibilities with both the social bond and visuality. We are not just consumers; we are also producers of cultural objects, as Michel de Certeau reminds us.[670] However, as Martínez Luna argues, digital

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[666] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 136
[667] *Ibid.,* p. 145.
[668] Ovalle, Imágenes abyectas…, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106.
[669] *Ibid.,* p. 109.
[670] "Many, often remarkable, works have sought to study the representations of a society, on the one hand, and its modes of behaviour, on the other. Building on our knowledge of these social phenomena, it seems both possible and necessary to determine the use to which they are put by groups or individuals. For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behaviour) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer "makes" or "does" during this time and with these images […] The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularisers as the key to socioeconomic advancement) tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse the manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference

visuality is “enabling the making of new logics of social and biopolitical control”.[671]

As developed in the previous chapter, Reyes argues that the abject other is the subject outside the boundaries of sociality that nevertheless acts on it to ascertain their existence. This raises a complicated question regarding the inside or outside of a bond. For purposes of this project, the social bond can be considered to be comprised of all those subjectivities that, even when mediated by violence and cruelty, are bounded by social, cultural, political, or economic characteristics. In that respect, any resistance to and re-articulation of the social bond would be hindered if victimisers, *sicarios* (hitmen)[672], executors of the organised crime or the State alike were considered strangers or complete outsiders to the social bond. As explained in the next section, these are further aggravated by the capitalist discourse.

The capitalist discourse

As mentioned in chapter three, in addition to the four discourses, Lacan alluded, on a single occasion, to a hypothesis on capitalist discourse. This discourse is considered a counter-discourse by other psychoanalysts—such as Alemán.[673] It differs from the other four because it does not fulfil the structural possibilities of discourse. While the others enable the experience of the unconscious, the capitalist discourse annuls this possibility.[674] The latter turns lack into a constant insatiability and, so, as a drive for enjoyment, it reunites lack and excess at the same time.[675]

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between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization”. Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life,* Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988, pp. xii – xiii.

[671] Martínez Luna, Cultura visual…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 170.

[672] Iván Ruiz says that “the different factions of sicarios have transformed the once internal vendetta into spectacles of public character by fabricating a grammar and semantics of horror where the cruelty is expressed in its pure state”. Iván Ruiz, *Docufricción: Prácticas artísticas en un México convulso,* Mexico City, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017, p. 21.

[673] “By this path, the capitalist discourse is a mutation in terms of the classic discourse of the master because, in its circular movement, it behaves like a counter-discourse. It presents itself as a true state of exception regarding the logical functioning of discourses and its respective structuring of the social bonds” Alemán, En la frontera*, Op. Cit.,* pp. 34-35.

[674] *Ibid.,* p. 31.

[675] *Ibid.,* pp. 31-32.

The capitalist discourse, as a deviation from the discourse of the master, aims at *taking* the word, organising its reign around its will and word. It further ruptures the social bond and exploits the lack into a mandate of enjoyment. The subject of enjoyment replaces the subject of the unconscious in the capitalist discourse[676] and installs the fantasy of limitless enjoyment. The individualism created by the capitalist discourse—as an illusion of *in*division—taken to extremes affects the subject within the social.[677] This is the reason why capitalist discourse is said to be incapable of making that bond.[678]

According to Colette Soler, cited in Carreño *et al*., the capitalist discourse *dissolves* the social bonds.[679] For Gloria Gómez, Lacan's proposition of the capitalist discourse as an organisation of our time implies "the idea that the current state of the social bond responds, largely, to the fact that such discourse does not provide individuals with semblants with which to establish a bond between them".[680] The discourse that organises the present time is creating bonds invested in the objects produced by the market.[681] This may imply that language, the creator of bonds, is, at present, stranded. Interestingly, Luis Izcovich argues that our time has managed to constitute a discourse where the idea that the image must be fundamental and sufficient to sustain a subject's existence is proper to the capitalist discourse.[682]

The foreclosure of castration[683] rejects the symbolic and denies the remainder of the Real. In that sense, there is no possibility of a bond mediated by the capitalist discourse: the foreclosure of the symbolic *is* the foreclosure in the social.[684] A person is subject to complex discursive relations to be contained within a social context. Hence, identifying the same and the different creates barriers where someone can be on the inside and some cast to the outside (enemies). The capitalist discourse inflates the individual, the One (as opposed to

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[676] Liliana Lamovsky, "¿El discurso capitalista es un discurso?", Coloquio de verano, Escuela Freudiana de Buenos Aires, 2012, p. 4.
[677] Marta Rietti, "El discurso analítico frente al odio y la crueldad del individualismo" (FROM, 21 September, 2020: http://www.imagoagenda.com/articulo.asp?idarticulo=2350).
[678] Ignacio Carreño, Emanuel Gastaldi and Julieta Panero, "Psicoanálisis y lazo social en la actualidad", in *Anuario de investigaciones de la facultad de psicología,* vol. 5, no. 5, p. 17.
[679] *Ibid.* p. 19.
[680] Gloria Gómez, "Dimensión histórica y estructura de las nuevas formas de goce", in *Desde el Jardín de Freud*, no. 15, p. 137.
[681] *Loc. Cit.*
[682] Luis Izcovich, "Sobre la identificación y la alienación", in *Desde el Jardín de Freud*, no. 15, p. 89.
[683] That promise to cure the subject of his desire through the consumption of the adequate object. Marie-Jean Sauret, "La lección de Pascal en la articulación entre el sujeto y el lazo social contemporáneo", in *Desde el Jardín de Freud*, no. 15, p. 142.
[684] Hernán Fair, "El discurso capitalista neoliberal desde una perspectiva lacaniana", in *Desafíos,* 31-1, p. 208.

ones), which means that the more a conception of *others* is incompatible with the One, the more the social bond is further torn. Critically, rather than merely impeding the articulation of bonds, the capitalist discourse results in more expressions of cruelty and hatred.

> This position of hate and cruelty is taken to an extreme in the current capitalist system that becomes savage, amongst other things, by how it treats knowledge and enjoyment […] Thus, cruelty and hatred towards the equal, in search of that wholeness that is intended to reach, become banalized as products to consume.[685]

In that line, the gaze for Lacan, explained by Rietti, is embedded as a drive object in hatred: both the one who hates and who assumes is hated, participate in a gaze that does not decline or fall; it holds steady.[686] Norma Alejandra Macia states that, through violence, we infringe upon the image of the other, on which the self is formed as I. There is a hole in the field of symbolic and imaginary identifications—fundamental for the constitution of the subject, relationships, and the social order. Imaginaries sustain the social coexistence, the same ones that help build the discourses on identities by "always relative and fragile signifiers".[687]

Every bond can be violent, given that they rest on language and its inherent lack. The nature of culture rests on that very violence. Certainly, not every form of cruelty can be explained through the capitalist discourse. However, the assertion is that societies resting on the imaginary register, with drives invested in objects turned to pure enjoyment, are encountering more difficulties in bonding. If, as Esteban Dipaola argues, we are witnessing a new experience of everyday life "sustained in the display of images that organise the relationship between individuals"[688], the explicitness, albeit hidden, of violent images is suggestive of a new, more elusive, cultural discontent.

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[685] Rietti, *Op. Cit.*
[686] *Loc. Cit.*
[687] Marcia Maluf, *Op. Cit.,* n.p.
[688] Dipaola, *Op. Cit.,* p. 312.

Torn bonds—no resting place

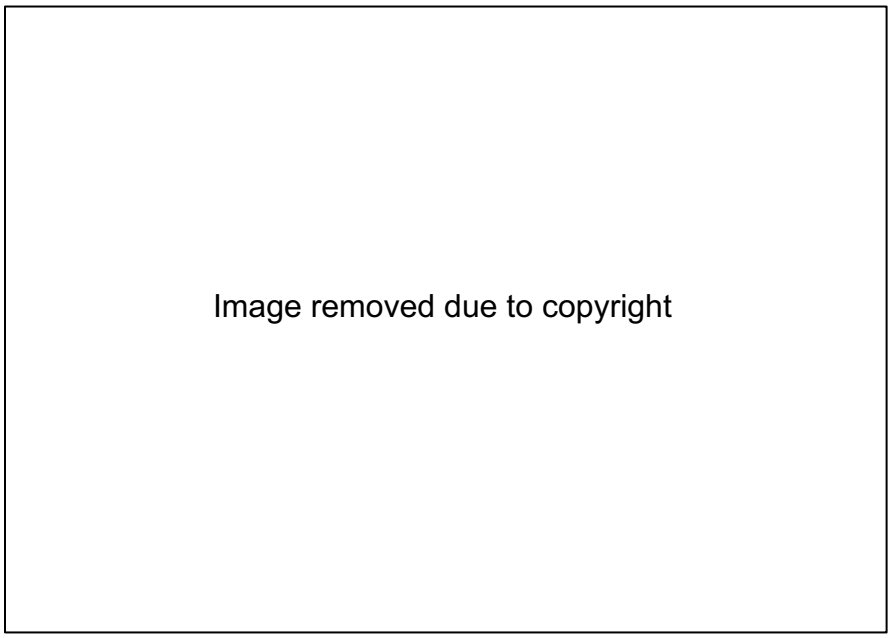

Image 6[689]

Image 6 shows Candelaria Chablé sitting beside a black bin bag containing her minor son's remains. It is the saddest expression of the intersection of Valencia and Reguillo's arguments. Chablé received her son's remains inside two black trash bags in the Prosecutor's office in Xalapa, Veracruz, in 2021. The fact that a government institution delivered with such contempt, coldness, and profanity the remains of her son demonstrates the lack of exceptionality of dying without a grave in Mexico, dying without name or resting place for remembrance and mourning. Recalling the last chapter's images and De Mora Martínez and Monroy Álvarez arguments on the "trashification of the bodies", they state that a substantive part of their reflections has been constructed on the treatment given to bodies and cadavers. Specifically, they refer to the funerary ritual—or lack thereof.[690]

> The funerary ritual, says Gabriel Giorgi, has been built through a singular partition: on the one hand, the dead and his imaginary founded based on

[689] Image can be found in: Miguel Ángel León Carmona, "Fiscalía de Veracruz entrega restos de hijo desaparecido en bolsas negras" (FROM, 28 March, 2021: https://piedepagina.mx/fiscalia-de-veracruz-entrega-restos-de-hijo-desaparecido-en-bolsas-negras/).
[690] De Mora Martínez and Monroy Álvarez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 124.

> recollections, narrations and history that make this perdure in the memories of those who bury him, and on the other hand would be the cadaver, the body given to biological processes discarded and forgotten, separating thus the person from the non-person. Giorgi says that new forms of biopolitics nowadays have had the effect of dislocating this funerary ritual, destroying certain cadavers to erase juridical and historical bonds that reunite corporality and community.[691]

Visuality, neoliberalism, and violence: icononecropolitics

The link between power, discourse, and violence—exacerbated and sustained by capitalism's structure(s)—unearths cruelty's visual discourse, as explored in the previous section. This is a discourse that erases singularity, which is ultimately "reduced to unilaterally exposed and interchangeably anonymous human matter".[692] Sayak Valencia coined the term *gore capitalism* to exemplify the "explicit and unjustified" bloodshed in the Mexican context. This refers to the "many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organised crime, gender and the predatory uses of bodies".[693] This term, thus, refers to the "brutal kinds of violence as tools of *necroempowerment*".[694]

As Valencia argues, the consumption of violence unmasks the use of violence beyond its condition of being a tool for another end. It has become "merchandise that is directed at a variety of niches; one example is the marketing of *decorative violence* to the middle classes and privileged sectors".[695] Valencia does not give concrete examples of these instances of decorative violence. However, many examples range from cultural materials—television series, movies, literature, music—and the more elusive, yet significantly intriguing, capacity of naming.[696] The prefix *narco*, amply mentioned earlier, implies the capacity of distancing the event from its representation through a word mediation that contains a semblance of meaning, the *signified.*

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[691] *Ibid.,* pp. 124-125.
[692] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession. The performative in the political conversations,* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 133.
[693] Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism,* South Pasadena, semiotext(e) intervention series, 2018, p. 12.
[694] *Loc. Cit.*
[695] *Ibid.,* p. 84.
[696] Reguillo, Necromáquina. Cuando morir no es suficiente, *Op. Cit.,* p. 188.

Reguillo, on the other hand, argues that outbreaks of violence are not out there, in a far beyond or circumscribed to "one space or the other, a savage and far away heterotopy linked to barbarity in direct opposition to civilisation".[697] Violences, she states, are present *here* in a complex space that works beyond the dichotomies of the past, those that sustain the opposition between barbarity and civilisation.[698] Likewise, she contests looking at these outbreaks of violence as exceptional because they are only so if regarded through a lens of natural peace and normality. She adds that a simple glance at Latin American media would suffice to disregard the idea of exceptionality. Whilst the affirmation of the Latin American press is accurate, and there is no such thing as a pacific and harmonious landscape, perhaps each death, each cruel event, should be regarded as singular, with the weight it deserves, even if not exceptional. Valencia and Reguillo's arguments call for identifying the structures that sustain and reinforce the operations of power and authority through visuality.

Returning to Calderón's discourse regarding the war and Foucault's claim of a non-sovereign power in industrial capitalism, we can observe how this power embodiment resided not merely in Calderón as a politician but in a capitalist-driven, disciplinary State structure. Analysing capitalism and neoliberalism's implications on violence does not respond solely to the economic understanding of organised crime but just as much to the visuality of violence as a sustaining element for its undertakings and the impact capitalism has on the social bond, as stated above. The relationship between power and visuality leads to that of a disciplinary, [deadly] scopic regime.[699] The violence of visuality and the visuality of violence, employed by the politics of neoliberalism as a means of disciplinary control, means returning to the problem of discourse and, in turn, to ground the problem of the social bond.

In Mexico, as mentioned before, the problem of sovereignty is related to the mediatic construction of the *narco* chronicle that "hinges on a politically configured official discourse and is not the result of an independent journalistic process".[700] This way of conceiving the conflict—in which organised crime is the enemy in a permanent state of threat to State sovereignty[701]—forces one to think how the discourse of the state of exception or emergency has come to be disseminated and what signifiers it is implementing subjectively and socially.

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[697] *Ibid.,* p. 33.
[698] Reguillo gives the example of Sadam Hussein's death as the collapse of that opposition. *Loc. Cit.*
[699] Hernández Navarro, El pensamiento anticipado…, *Op. Cit.*, p. 168.
[700] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* pp. 30-31.
[701] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

> Justifying the bloodiest program of biopolitics conceived in modern Mexican history, Calderón propelled the official state narrative that claimed that the country was in the hands of dangerous drug cartels much more concerned with annihilating each other than in continuing to generate the unfathomable profits that allegedly put them on the Forbes millionaires list.[702]

Calderón "explained" nearing the end of his term that he became aware of the problems with drug trafficking when he took office. Retroactively, this can undoubtedly be the fight for State sovereignty. Nevertheless, it implied more than the use of violence to preserve the existing Rule of Law.[703] In a wildly different example to image 6, a visual example of the mediatic construction of criminal leaders as the enemy is the execution of Beltrán Leyva in 2009. Beltrán Leyva's assassination—chapter two, image 1—alongside all the events presented here further indicates two points of reflection through a necropolitical perspective. One is that the conformation of necropolitics is based on discriminatory and racist acts. Another is that, in order to sustain the sovereign-defending [apparent] state of emergency, this war relied on visual operations to create the social imaginary that would continue feeding it.

The recurring typology of victims and perpetrators, according to Zavala, "suggests that the objective of this war was mainly focused on the lower ranks of drug sales in the poorest neighborhoods of besieged cities, and not in the financial and business sectors that make the transnational circulation of drug profits possible".[704] Thus, Calderón's "war" is best approached from a *necropolitical* perspective. The problem is indeed one of sovereignty, as Achille Mbembe constructs throughout his emblematic text, and Carlos Alberto Navarro examines in the Mexican case from the intersections of biopower and necropolitics. Navarro refers to Mbembe's argument, maintaining that necropower implies the subjection of life to the power of death.[705] He further introduces the mediatic component mentioned by Villoro and notices that the national security ideology was sustained by the "great televisual-mediatic powers that turn everything they touch into truth".[706]

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[702] *Ibid.,* p. 106.
[703] This refers to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence,* where he states that "In the great criminal this violence confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law, a threat that even today, despite its impotence, in important instances horrifies the public as it did in primeval times". Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", in *Selected Writings. Volume One,* United States of America, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 241.
[704] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 63.
[705] Navarro states that violence became an end in itself that was further fuelled by the use of science, technology, mathematics, informatics, statistics, demography, communication media, and the management and control of symbols and contents. Navarro Fuentes, *Op. Cit.*, p. 420.
[706] *Loc. Cit.*

Regarding the discriminatory and racist structure of necropolitics, the very essence of the war against drug trafficking is of this nature. However, it was further embedded by the media. Violence was constructed to be exclusive to *the other*—both as executor and receiver—awaiting its act by people who looked a certain way, had certain names, and lived in a particular place and in certain conditions, as shown in images 3 and 4. This relates to the unseeable in the seeable and the unsayable in the sayable.[707]

Contrary to Zavala's argument[708], but equally important, Pablo Daniel Sánchez Ceci argues that when criminality is institutionalised, a movement between capitalistic profit and natural resources dispossession gives way to the emergence of the *narco* and State and armed paramilitary groups as central actors. Thus flourish, he says, the signs of cruelty in the bodies where a signification can be generated.[709] This relates to Blair's conception of a "deeper violence" that would imply the violence that affects subjectivity in individuals and societies as much as the physical dimension of the bodies: "not only in the bodies but in their vital spaces, its significations, its sense of order".[710]

The powers operating in Mexico through discourses that objectify violence, separate the subject from the effects of seeing, and actively impose the order and intensification of the lives worth living and those that are not even worth grieving. It is a cruel device, returning to Ulloa's thoughts. Reguillo's point of view is that, when going deeper into the horror of massacres in Mexico, a murky power that operated anonymously can be identified. It creates "a sort of metastasis that began engulfing the social tissue" in the entrails of society.[711] Reguillo argues that "the insistence in thinking of it as a power exterior to society, as if we did not have absolutely nothing to do with that deterioration, that surge in violence, resulted on the one hand in a normalisation and, on the other hand, in the aestheticisation of brutal violence".[712]

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[707] There is an inherent invisibility to the hypervisualised violence in Mexico, where the imaginaries are built and become their own creators of repetitive meanings.
[708] Zavala argues that "that the logic of globalization assumed by cultural studies and by conceptualizations of the political as the impossibility of a sovereign state, are insufficient in understanding the presence of the Mexican state as the very condition of possibility of the narco". Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* pp. 63-64.
[709] Pablo Daniel Sánchez Ceci, "Estética necropolítica. La muerte como lenguaje y mercancía", in *ETCÉTERA,* no. 8, pp. 7-8.
[710] Elsa Blair, "Aproximación teórica al concepto de violencia", in *Política y Cultura,* no. 32, p. 31.
[711] Reguillo, Necromáquina. Cuando morir no es suficiente*, Op. Cit*, p. 132.
[712] *Loc. Cit.*

Image removed due to copyright

Image 7[713]

Image removed due to copyright

Image 8[714]

[713] Image can be found in: Redacción AN / JM, “Amanece Uruapan con cadáveres colgados y desmembrados | Video” (FROM, 18 June, 2022: https://aristeguinoticias.com/0808/mexico/amanece-uruapan-con-cadaveres-colgados-y-desmembrados-video/).

[714] Image can be found in: Infobae, “Masacre en Uruapan: CJNG dejó 19 cuerpos mutilados y colgados de un puente” (FROM, 18 June, 2022: https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/08/08/horror-en-uruapan-dejaron-al-menos-16-cuerpos-mutilados-y-colgados-de-un-puente/). The image in question is the third one.

Again, this time in August 2019, Uruapan, Michoacán captured the country's attention by being the stage for the dismemberment and hanging of 20 people. Six of them, depicted in the images, were hanged from the vehicular bridge, and the other dismembered bodies were found in the surroundings. A *narcomanta* was found signed by Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, one of the cruellest and most sadistic cartels—similar to The Zetas. This cruelty is notable in and outside the image. Image 7 blurrily shows the semblance of four bodies hanging from the bridge. In image 8, the bodies are more distinct, while, at the same time, the lack of light complements the eeriness.

We can sense a lot is going on in and with these images. Like the other ones shown here, in these images, we observe the continuing exercise of capturing, reproducing, and reiterating the being-while-dead of the involuntarily portrayed people in them. Up and down, hanging and lying, half-naked, tortured, torn, with beams of light as if signalling them—probably due to the framing enacted by the photographer. We do not see the other bodies, just these, the ones hanging and the ones on their feet. The explanation-signature of the crime grounding a scene that exceeds the frame. Part of the message in the *narcomanta* says, "Gente bonita, siga con su rutina […] Haz patria mata a un Viagra", which translates to "Beautiful people, carry one with your routines […] Be patriotic and kill a Viagra".

Another element that did not go amiss to people and newspapers alike was the presence of a food cart underneath the bridge. It caused curiosity, speculation, and bewilderment. Was the cart there when the bodies were hanged and dumped, or did Isidro, the burger-stand man, arrive afterwards? Others report that Isidro witnessed how the bodies were left there by members of organised crime. According to the witnesses, he continued making burgers until it was time for him to finish working and go home—resounding with the theatrical element mentioned earlier.

These images, the discussions they generated after their diffusion, and the act itself exemplify for the locals the discussion about visuality and cruelty in the country and its effects on the social bond—the upside-down spectral encounter between life and death. People are not merely dying but being marked and exposed, and life and subjectivity are visibly removed from them. At the same time, life continues *as if* it is still happening. The man, assumedly, continues his job making food until six in the morning. The oppositions of living—generating heat, smell, food, the sensations that accompany these—and dying—the coldness, the spillage of blood, the decay. It exemplifies continuing to exist—even if to produce—in a country dyed in red. The message in the *narcomanta* [tries to] says it all:

"carry on with your routines", and perhaps this *is* the everyday life now. The working man, cars driving through, people walking, and neighbours calling the police in a panic and living with it, against everything that points towards violent and cruel death.

This "war" was, and continues to be, a war against citizens and, thus, carried out materially. Nevertheless, it has as much been wayed symbolically and imaginarily. The intention is not to minimise the real and material effects of the violence, the uprooted and displaced communities, the tortures, and the forced disappearances. The lost lives that, through the turnings of official and mediatic discourses, remain unnamed, unrecognised, unremembered, or blatantly disregarded. Still, as contested here, the imaginary and symbolic registers have been unsurmountable in disseminating violence and cruelty. The construction of visuality in Mexico has sustained and reinforced a reality of violence, however framed and fragmented. Nonetheless, it has created discourses of violence that disseminate violence and cruelty in ways that have seeped into the formations of subjectivity and social bonds.

Final considerations

Navarro cites Zygmunt Bauman, who argues that "the necropolitics of the neoliberal State and its regime of accumulation leaves waste in the residual margins; the figure is not the return to the labour market that mediates life, its figure is the expulsion, and its place, the landfill".[715] This is reminiscent both of the interlude's brief examination of the feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and De Mora Martínez and Monroy Álvarez concept of trashfication of the bodies. Thus, it is essential to remark that women's bodies have been subjected to horrific and cruel deaths, and their images are likewise reproduced.

In the case of feminicides in Ciudad Juárez*,* Zavala states that feminicide is portrayed in Bolaños' *2666* as "the extreme effect of the biopolitics exerted by the neoliberal state that collectively transforms the lives of thousands of female *maquiladora* workers".[716] They are simultaneously outside the rule of law and within the capitalist logic that demands

[715] Navarro Fuentes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 428.
[716] Zavala, Drug Cartels..., *Op. Cit.,* p. 60.

their existence for labour. The vulnerability of these women "materializes when their bodies, excluded from normative society, become objects of impunity".[717]

> Returning to the notion of immunity proposed by Esposito, the workers are separated from their community toward the margins as if an act of asepsis was performed on the social fabric. Like those who have been abandoned by the state of exception, according to Agamben, although the women don't appear to be within the scope of legality, they are instead affected by the logic of immunity created by the local powers. They are then "exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable." In other words, the bodies of the murdered women, even in the face of the indifference of the state, or precisely because of this indifference that condemns them to that blurred space, are saturated with the power of the state. They are exactly the most concrete form of the materialization of that same power.[718]

More recently, the reproduction of images of Ingrid Escamilla's body, murdered by her partner—thus categorised as feminicide—caused serious protests and manifestations. Hundreds of women marched for the feminicide and the divulgation of the images. This is one of many protest cases in a country with alarming increases in feminicides. It prompted Congress to pass a law named after her to sanction public servers sharing images, audio, or videos of a penal investigation. Even if a necessary step in recognition of the intersection of gender violence and visuality, it is insufficient for a country with such high levels of impunity and that consistently reproduces images of all types of victims.[719]

Feminicides, forced disappearances, and all the cruel ways of killing in Mexico have become commonplace in Mexico; even with the exemption of forced disappearance, we have become accustomed to *seeing* them. It is not only in the feeling of insecurity[720] but also in the deep-rooted transformations of being with the other that we can attest to the modifications in subjectivity and the social bond—which will be developed further in the next chapter. Violence has touched every corner in the material and *real* sense. Cruelty has

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[717] *Loc. Cit.*
[718] *Ibid.,* pp. 60-61.
[719] Due to constraints in this research, I have been unable to delve more into this issue. However, this is a pending and utterly crucial problem for analysis.
[720] The National Institute of Statistical and Geographical Information (INEGI in Spanish) uses certain categories to quantify the subjective perception of insecurity in Mexico. This develops into the objectivation of the perception of insecurity and violence for a percentage of the population. Thus, they suggest the variations for the population who "consider that it is insecure living in their city" have fluctuated from 68.1% in December 2020 to 64.5% in September 2021 to 65.8% in December 2021. The same survey found that women estimated a higher risk of insecurity than men (70.3% and 60.2%, respectively). Redacción Animal Político, "Sube percepción de inseguridad en diciembre; 65.8% de los mexicanos temen vivir en su ciudad" (FROM, 19 January, 2022: https://www.animalpolitico.com/2022/01/sube-percepcion-inseguridad-diciembre-mexicanos-inegi/).

secured its place by marking the singular and social bodies with demands for *more* and impunity when attaining it. It has been able to do so through the imposition of signifiers whereby bodies amount to nothing more but "worlds of death".[721] Through the constitution of imaginaries where "violent death does not allow to reconstruct identities nor affects".[722]

Images of violence are not just an aspect of visuality for which we need a pedagogy to understand them. They are part of and creators of the array of visuality where these can play a role of disciplining, disappearing, and in-visibilising. Visuality, as the social construction of vision and visual construction of the social, can be, at the very least, a mirror reflecting the turnings of the gaze of a time. However, it also operates as machinery presenting a whole picture and its fragments. It can create truths and beliefs. It can inform as much as create. Visuality, as a discursive structure, can forge as much as it can slash the very threads that make the social bond. Nevertheless, what we ask of it is not independent of our participation. It is considering whether we are asking too much or too little of images, but also to question the social bonds that create and reflect the violent visuality.

[721] This refers to Navarro's argument in Navarro Fuentes, *Op. Cit.* p. 415.
[722] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 212.

Chapter five: memory, mourning, and the possibility of imagining different futures

> The evil that leads one to delight in the murder and torture of another human being can never be, in our view, an indifferent experience for the perpetrator.
> —León Rozitchner[723]

> The desire to kill and the fear of dying can destroy any project of building a social space where it is impossible for potential victims and murderers to live together.
> —Marie-José Mondzain[724]

> In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.
> —Christina Sharpe[725]

The last chapter explored how visuality in Mexico intrinsically relates to violence and cruelty, primarily due to the war on drugs, which started in 2006. Since the early twentieth century, Mexico has had a tradition of including a visual component of violence in articles relating to accidents, crimes, or natural disasters, mainly in the *nota roja*. However, since the beginning of the war on drugs in 2006, there has been a notable increase not only in the

[723] León Rozitchner in Franco, *Op. Cit.,* p. 18.
[724] Mondzain, *Op. Cit.,* p. 25.
[725] Christina Sharpe, *In the wake: on Blackness and being,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 9.

number and reproduction of images of violence but in their cruelty, virulence, and, ultimately, incorporation into our daily lives.

The increasing quantity of different types of deaths and the relationships to the dead that have plagued Mexico in recent years have changed the traditional rites full of symbolism towards an all-engulfing imaginary of horror, fear, and *jouissance.* The former chapters have explored the different forms of interaction and affectations images of violence and cruelty can have on subjectivity and the social bond. Analysing images of violence, the visual culture they are part of, and the broad aspects of subjectivity and the social bond help address whether images of violence can have effects in these instances.

Whilst the extent to which subjectivities and social bonds have been affected will likely be devised only in the coming years, some elements evidence the forms it has taken and might take. This chapter will suggest some forms of subjectivities and bonds that can be witnessed in relation to violence and visuality, as well as suggest potential avenues for different forms of engagement with these images. Both these points—the incipient or devisable forms of subjectivities and bonds and potential forms of engagement going forward—are, in a way, inseparable. To think of one of the impacts of violence and its visual form on different ways of constituting subjectivity and the social bond leads to questioning future ramifications, the futures to come from these ways of seeing and being singularly and with the other.

The project began with the Dirty War in the 1960s and culminates in an unknown—yet at the time expected—future. However, disjoining these and understanding the past, present, and future through their articulation with each other may facilitate a critical view of the present and towards the future. Violence in Mexico—further materialised by the country's militarisation under Andrés Manuel López Obrador—is unlikely to decrease in the near future. On the contrary, the horrors keep piling and multiplying, increasingly crueller. Therefore, recognising our engagement with images of violence, the potential ways in which they affect us, and how we, in turn, concede and construct a visual culture with them could be a first step in comprehending the enveloping imaginary, symbolic, and real violences.

With this recognition, an ensuing shift in approach towards images of violence could have significant effects on the subjective, social, cultural, and political scopes of violence in the country. This chapter marks the return to the first chapter, a re-tracing of the text. "If it is not spoken, if it is not written nor recounted, it is forgotten, and little by little it is buried under the fear […] Because no one speaks of what happened, nothing has happened. Then, if

nothing has happened, we continue living as usual".[726] Unlike other Latin American processes of truth, justice, and memory following dictatorships, the years of the Dirty War in Mexico are rarely discussed—focusing predominantly on the 2 October 1968 massacre when addressed.

Even if Mexico could be said to be living the unspoken, concealed, forgotten, or repressed effects of failing to confront the events of the Dirty War and is living through the crudest consequences of capitalism and neoliberalism's necropolitics, Mexico will have to construct its own work of remembrance. Elmer Mendoza maintains that Mexico will have to learn more from the dead than from the living.[727] This implies working towards a remembrance that learns from other experiences but distinguishes its singularity and builds from its unique, painful history. This proposal is questionable, given that memory and remembrance are usually conducted in social and political contexts where a break has occurred, where a division—political or legal—between before and after allows a critical gaze into the past. At the same time, however, simply assuming that the break has taken place and the change has come can have the silencing effect of assuming this will change on its own.

By incorporating previous theoretical and visual approximations of past and present violences, in this chapter, I will try to underline the subjective and social aspects that still need to be unearthed and addressed for the present and future. In the same way that subjectivities and social bonds will conceivably be better approached in the future, memory also offers the dual capacity of pushing for that excision, making space for a critical gaze, and guiding the gaze and memory to come. Therefore, this chapter will begin by exploring singular and social configurations that can be glimpsed in the country, even if they do not constitute the whole array of subjectivities and social bonds.

The last point will include the study of the potential space for singular and collective trauma and the changes in the victim's conception. It will pause on another significant aspect of Mexican violence: forced disappearances. Even when the extremeness of their cruelty is not visualised as in the images shown in the previous chapters, they have an image; they are part of today's subjective and social imaginaries, and they have profound consequences on the social bond. All these reflections will lead to thinking of memory and mourning as

[726] Testimony from inhabitant of Trujillo, Colombia cited in Jacqueline Garza Placencia, "Entre el silencio y la memoria. Familiares organizados de personas desaparecidas en México", Perrée, Caroline, Diéguez, Ileana, coords., *Cuerpos memorables,* Mexico City, CEMCA, 2018, p. 169.
[727] Elmer Mendoza in Ileana Diéguez, *Cuerpos sin duelo. Iconografías y teatralidades del dolor*, Monterrey, UANL, 2016, p. 7.

forms of resistance by repositioning the gaze towards images of violence and cruelty. A crucial element introduced briefly at the end but left pending for another project is the emergence of subjectivities of survival, thinking about this as Mexicans being immersed in daily violence and cruelty, death drives, despair, melancholy, and how this affects living and surviving.

Some subjective and social articulations of violence

As mentioned in chapter two, the discourse regarding the evil of drugs, drug trafficking, and drug traffickers—all enveloped in the term *narco*—became the banner by which Calderón conducted the war on drugs. Through this tautological discourse, where those who died were, in some way, connected to the "evil" or "bad" side, everyone became an actual or potential criminal, be it by proximity or association. Thus, the borders that distinguished the enemy from the innocent became blurred in the name of this fight *because* of these supposed differentiations. Guilty or innocent made no difference in this war; in the instances in which innocent people were acknowledged, they were called "collateral damage".

Diverse authors sustain this point: the war on drugs is a war against everyone, against society at large, but executed through the semblance of being against drug traffickers or the *narco*. The discourses on the *narco* merely enabled its appropriation into the symbolic and imaginary life of the country. Consequently, throughout the text, analysing the elements constituting discourses on the war and the *narco* has been essential. However, other signifiers are likewise predominant in the country and suggestive of the subjective and social configurations that have taken place. These discourses obturate the possibility of thinking of and with the other beyond fixed, unbending, constraining categories. A notable instance is the assumption that violence has a specific form and enacting subject. This can lead to either not recognising other forms of violence or learning to live with those that are too familiar.

Other instances include the binary discourses of good and evil, friend and enemy, and victim and victimiser. The first two were addressed in chapters one and two. The latter, the victim-victimiser pair, would require a more thorough analysis than is available here.

However, it is nevertheless crucial to understand the subjective and social configurations that are taking place in the country and how the self and other(s) are categorised. When addressing further in the chapter the processes of memory and mourning and the possibility of survival in the country, this category—and the potential adjacent one of trauma—is essential and will be developed briefly.

The concept of victim and its insistent, at times, mirrored attachment with that of victimiser are commonly employed in the country, more so since the increase of violence. However, there are many questions to be asked and analysis to be conducted on how the victim, victimhood, is framed in the country. Manero Brito argues that it is not only because of the significant number of victims in the country that this concept and category merits an analysis but also because of the qualitative changes its conception has undertaken. "The processes of victimisation, assigning the category or statute of the victim, the same as the collective signification of said statute have correlatively changed the transformations in the exercise of violence in our context".[728] Consequently, Manero Brito argues that studying the victims of violence in Mexico cannot focus solely on the direct victims but on the subtle and blatant transformations of the social tissue.[729]

For Manero Brito, the Dirty War represents a critical moment whereby the moral norms that deterred the rape and murder of women and kids or using the criminals' or adversaries' families to achieve their purposes were suspended. In its place, it installed a pedagogy of horror subsequently incorporated into the collective memory and in the register of the state's repressive apparatus. The violences that have come since have, according to the author, generated a trail of pain and suffering that has caused significant social damage.[730]

Following the Dirty War, the moral codes were dissolved, resulting in what Manero Brito characterises as sacrilegious violence. Despite contemporary secularisation, certain regions and objects in Mexico maintained honour codes that protected children, women, and families in the community or intercommunity conflicts. These codes prohibited exercising

[728] Manero Brito, *Op. Cit.,* p. 11.
[729] *Loc. Cit.*
[730] *Ibid.,* pp. 12-13.

extreme violence against these groups. With the Dirty War[731], these codes were profaned and incorporated into everyday daily use.[732]

> These violences have been transformed. Every time, the physical and psychological damage to their victims is greater. They have become a political instrument used more and more in a network of concealments that try to produce social demobilisation, the dejection of resistance.[733]

The concept of the victim is exceptionally complex. It can refer to those who suffer violence or cruelty directly; the family members that mourn them, that look for them in the case of the disappeared; and they can be individuals or groups. It includes, alludes, or refers to its supposed counterpart, the victimiser. However, as it is often noted, the victimisers are often their own type of victims; therein lies the necessity to develop a critique of the term. Historically, culturally and visually, the victims and victimisers can be locked into a complex mirrored or echoed being, where one has the potential to occupy both positions simultaneously.

Extreme violence, according to Manero Brito, enforces the participation of the victim, either in resistance to or in satisfying the victimiser.[734] From this assertion, we can gather that not only is the victim being passively victimised but that, given that something is expected from the victim—resistance, crying, shouting, pleading, bleeding—and they can engage or refuse to do so—which amounts to an active decision—a degree of liveliness is required. For the author, this can take the form of resistance, and thus self-destruction, or trying to satisfy the victimiser. Both, essentially trying to maintain control over the situation, are also forms of survival.[735]

Writing about the Colombian context but pertinent to Mexico's future, M. Lucía Rivera sustains that in active participation in the experience of war, the double role of victim and victimiser is underrepresented in common sensibilities, except when referring to national army soldiers. In post-conflict Colombia, Rivera identifies the troublesome possibility of thinking that it is better to identify emotionally with the victims rather than the victimisers. However, Rivera continues, this represents "not only an unbridgeable Manichaeism, and an omission of the ways of being a victim in an exceptionally complex conflict, but also

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[731] Manero Brito explains this as a pronounced exacerbation after "World War II and the Nazi horror; the French military refined torture techniques and control by terror. Afterwards, the US did this in Vietnam, and was practised in Latin American dictatorships, not to mention the massacres in Africa". *Ibid.,* p. 12.
[732] *Ibid.,* pp. 12-13.
[733] *Ibid.,* p. 12.
[734] *Ibid.,* p. 78.
[735] *Loc. Cit.*

undermines many of the necessary bases for the possibility of a transition that implies the construction of a shared citizenship with former participants of the conflict".[736]

In Mexico, as Manero Brito sustains, violent criminality is directly proportional to state violence, further complicating the problem. "We suspect that there must be some type of agreement, some form of collusion between State and delinquent organisations".[737] Thus, the author argues that in Mexico, violence is not committed as random acts conducted by isolated people or by "crazy" individuals possessed by cruelty but by highly organised criminality. The latter possess technological, tactical, and logistical capacities.[738]

> From the fog of war, the victimised bodies narrate the politics of extermination of the most vulnerable sectors of Mexican society, as was proved by a demographic study of the massacres: young brown men between 25 and 29 years without education and unemployed, who were born and died poor, inhabitants of the margins of the main cities of Mexico, criminalised by a racist and classist system that far from offering a future, it provided them with political death economically profitable for the governing and corporate elites of the country. The victimisers, the so-called "sicarios"[739] accused by the authorities, posed no significant differentiation from the victims: they too were poor brown young men with poor living conditions in the poorest boroughs of the Mexican cities, and with the only difference of being approximately five years younger than the sacrificed by the "narco".[740]

Zavala explains how, in the complex machinery of criminality and violence in Mexico, age is the main documented differentiation between victim and victimiser. The victims, on average five years younger, stem from the same precarious, marginalised, and abject conditions as victimisers. Problematically, this idea could lead to disputing that victims could become victimisers if given five years. Furthermore, this generalisation drives into two dynamics of concern: one, the *a priori* criminalisation of subjects with these characteristics; two, the unstable positions this Manichaeism incites.

On the first point are the thoughts of Rigoberto Reyes, mentioned in chapters three and four, and those of Juan Pablo Mollo. Reyes examines how a diffuse and informal war[741]

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[736] M. Lucía Rivera S., "Narrativas de una guerra cotidiana, o una cotidianidad en guerra", in Uribe María Victoria and Parrini, Rodrigod, eds., *La violencia y su sombra*. *Aproximaciones desde Colombia y México,* Bogota, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Cuajimalpa, 2020, p. 155.
[737] Manero Brito, *Op. Cit.,* p. 62.
[738] *Loc. Cit.*
[739] Hitmen.
[740] Zavala, La guerra en las palabras*, Op. Cit.,* pp. 356-357.
[741] Rigoberto Reyes bases this term on Segato's one to refer to the new armed conflicts no longer characterised by the confrontation between two armies. Instead, it is characterised by "the confrontation between state forces and violent armed groups operating within the same national

creates the abjection of certain bodies as part of "political and economic processes that configure precarious lives or lives not worth living, which are usually cast to the numerous margins that open around power centres positioned in the megalopolis".[742] The second examines how delinquency and criminality are an effect of the penal system.

For Reyes, the repugnant presences are a product of a tapestry of subtle violences that affect the wholeness of the bodies until they are liquidated. Through micro-violences, this process has devastating effects on bodies and subjectivities; Reyes calls it "liquidating bodies".[743] These are not the bodies destroyed by high-impact violence but those that are a product of diffuse and fluid violences. Reyes notes, however, that abject subjects are not just passive receptors of violence, but they too exercise it, "sometimes assuming the negative identity imposed to them by others, therefore configuring a spiral of violences that constantly crosses and moulds them".[744]

Conversely, Mollo develops a highly critical and gripping analysis of delinquency and the penal system. Even if the representations of the delinquent or criminal may vary throughout countries, religions, and cultures, there is an undoubted alliance between capitalism and technique that "promotes multiple mechanisms of detection of social dangers, classified and characterised by a triumphant evaluating machine in the contemporary institutional modernity".[745] Through discursive fictions, according to Mollo, the delinquent and the penal system constitute a vicious circle whereby the delinquent assumes a quantifiable substance used as the guiding principle for their criminalisation. Through this act of political power, the effect is the fabrication of delinquency tailored to each society.[746]

This last idea returns to the second point mentioned above and Manero Brito's explanation of criminality in Mexico. Unlike previous types of criminality, today's is not determined by passion or emotion but through rational elements that guide its actions and perspectives. Thus, modern delinquency is situated, according to him, as a social institution that "defines its own subject, the delinquent, and his victim, always anonymous devoid of

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territory. They are undeclared wars and scarcely regulated in which non-armed actors are likewise attacked, particularly women, immigrants, people experiencing poverty, children, and other vulnerable groups. These conflicts are composed of armed confrontations and create 'diffused war landscapes', in which large population groups live in virtual states of exception". Reyes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 36.

[742] *Loc. Cit.*

[743] "Proper to what Zygmunt Bauman has named 'liquid modernity'". *Ibid.,* p. 37.

[744] *Loc. Cit.*

[745] Juan Pablo Mollo, *La construcción del delincuente,* Buenos Aires, Grama ediciones, 2016, p. 11.

[746] *Loc. Cit.*

any sentimentality and implicated in a movement whose plot escapes all the actors".[747] Now, there is a complex game operating, an instituted social practice whose objective is evidently symbolic, says Manero Brito, "situated outside the field of direct visibility of the actors".[748] The author moves away from the individual delinquent—and their potential psychiatric definition—to the large social layers, including families and social groups, that form part of this new delinquent institution. These are, as mentioned above:

> Marginalised social groups that have established, in time, the conditions for a social practice of survival, of their development every time more distant from the outdated juridical framework that can no longer adjudicate them with an ethical or moral signification, the conditions to establish a symbolic network possessed with a functional organisation, and with an imaginary component that defines a cut or a redistribution of the constellation of social significations that give meaning to their action. From these groups, a new individual arises, of our actuality, a predator able to consider the *undifferentiated mass* of the population his market; it *exploits* it based on the opportunities not only for profit but also of the signification that offers him that special place in the world: the excluded, in their resentment, also have their place.[749]

For Manero Brito, this is a functional institutional product of the decay of the Mexican political system, corporativism, and presidentialism. Coupled with the neoliberal logic, the technologies of domination act directly on the social bond by aiming to eliminate any possibility of collective articulation that could represent a counter-power or resistance to the state power.[750] Félicie Nayrou examined this by studying the social un-bonding "that some people are victims of" and how this, in turn, may produce internal attacks that render it impossible to transmit symbolic referents, limits, and prohibitions to their children.[751]

> In the process of social un-bonding, the individual is placed—totally or partially—outside of what symbolically and relationally connects or connected them to their peers in the same belonging. Numerous contemporary analyses on this subject are centred on what happens when the individual-society bond stops being supported. In many of these works, the concept of anomie is usually employed—with excessive ease, moreover—to design the disaggregation of

[747] Manero Brito, *Op. Cit.,* p. 62.
[748] *Ibid.,* p. 63.
[749] *Ibid.,* p. 64.
[750] "In Mexico, the recent guerrillas in Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca have been the privileged social laboratory for the 'refinement' of a politic of reduction of social and political resistances. The cities constitute themselves as the proper object of application of said strategies. Thus, it initiates a true civil war, not where the government confronts delinquency, but the one that the population confronts with parastate groups organised in the delinquent institution". *Ibid.,* p. 65.
[751] Félicie Nayrou, "El imposible objeto de transmision en la anomia de la deligazón social", in Glocer Fiorini, Leticia, comp., *Los laberintos de la violencia,* Buenos Aires, Lugar Editorial, 2008, p. 52.

> the social bond, considered at times as a cause and at times as a consequence.[752]

From a psychoanalytic and sociological perspective, Nayrou explains that the un-bonding is not necessarily a complete disintegration of the institutional and social structures. The bond in its form of "normal anomaly" can be "insidiously undone after the apparent continuity of institutional functioning but with the loss of the community of meaning".[753] However, each person will be affected differently by the loss of meaning depending on their sense of belonging and compromise to the bond.[754]

As the previous chapters on the social bond developed, the subject must limit their drives to function on social terms. The social bond and the symbolic grounding set by the parents work towards this objective: to maintain destructive drives in a state of latency. The prohibition that falls over the drives, as explained by Nayrou, is set by culture and transmitted by the social bond. The objective of the social bond is to include the subject in a framework that makes the subject exist as such. This framework provides the subject with an identity that, at the same time, must be recognised by the other. Culture, the anchor of the social bond, requires that the subject withstands the excitement provoked by the presence of this other without immediately acting on his drives. Between the symbolic structuring order that gives meaning to each subject's place and culture as a civilising process, there is a dialectic relationship: "culture is the transmission vector of the symbolic order, and the symbolic system is the bearer of culture".[755]

> The process of culture is, in essence, the pursued goal by a sublimation sacrifice of drive realisations in view to the "creation of a great human community" that exceeds all subjects; this pressure is even more coercive, he [Freud] adds, than a cultural superego, which "is happy, as a general rule, with a restrictive role". Freud is particularly pessimistic about this process: not only can it fail to achieve the domestication of drives in pursuit of humanisation, but, on the contrary, and precisely due to the exercise of excessive coercion, by the defusion operating in the sublimation activity, can foster the most barbaric unleashing under the action of the death drive.[756]

The term social bond employed here is not only significant as a theoretical ground to understand violence, language, and the bond between subjects. It is likewise crucial to think of other possible ways of *being with* the other. Whilst the social order, as sustained by

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[752] *Ibid.,* p. 53.
[753] *Ibid.,* p. 56.
[754] *Loc. Cit.*
[755] *Ibid.,* pp. 56-57.
[756] *Ibid.,* p. 63.

Isabelle Morin, can be founded on hatred, violence, racism, or tyranny that can lead to segregation and can be constituted *against* the social bond, the latter can restore the living by its condition of being what unites the speaking-beings. In other words, the social field is not equivalent to the social or the social bond. The social can be constituted, according to Morin, *against* the social bond.[757]

Thus, it is not hard to imagine to what extent the social bond in Mexico has been impacted by relentless violence and, more troubling still, pronounced displays of cruelty. This project never intended to analyse one side or the [many] other[s] in how images of violence and a violent visuality affect subjectivity and the social bond. That is, to question what "the bad"—be it organised crime, paramilitary groups, or the state—were doing to "the good"—society at large. On the contrary, one of the main intentions was to dismount these dichotomic discourses where any subjectivity or bond is single-sided and unmovable.

This discussion into the concept of victim and its questionable opposite, the victimiser, intends to reposition the preconceived notions—primarily constructed by the discourses on the *narco*—of who the victims are and, pointedly, what constitutes a victim. In the game of victimisations, re-victimisations, pointing to the victimiser, there are countless simultaneous subjective positions where these words no longer, if ever, represent a singular body or position. Manero Brito argues that there are no longer just direct victims but subtle transformations in the social bond. This leads to question the operability of these words and their statute in a society such as Mexico's.[758]

A latent question, particularly in these pages, refers to the broader scope of Mexicans that do not fit into the more common characteristics of victim/victimiser. Whilst natural, this question holds several challenging aspects: one is if there can be a general sense of victimisation in the country. Another is that Mexico is a wildly diverse country with many other victims of the system and institutions—such as indigenous and afro-indigenous groups—and violence can and has infiltrated even in those pertaining to other [upper] social classes. Third, the victim—a complicated term in itself—is no longer just the *one*; there are consistently new groups or movements of victims.[759]

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[757] Isabelle Morin, "Las consecuencias de la fobia en el lazo social", in *Desde el jardín de Freud, Revista de psicoanálisis,* no. 15, p. 104.

[758] A further critical approximation to the different conceptions of the victim, such as Manero Brito does, is pending and possible for future research.

[759] "Currently, we could not understand our society without the victims' movements. Secondary victims who demand the apparition of their disappeared family members, victims who walk an endless procession finding mass graves and remains, demanding truth in the processes of forced disappearance and the ineffectiveness of an accomplice and supine State; victims who violent the attempts of normalisation of violence, that denounce the biases in law enforcement, the machismo

Even if some have been fortunate enough to remain directly untouched by violence and cruelty by their economic and social position in an economic and political system that values certain lives, we can contest that it is unlikely that someone has utterly, even if indirectly, evaded both the visuality of these violences and its social effects—even if in the perverse logics of neoliberal necropolitics. A theory that fits all the subjectivities and bonds in the country is highly implausible. However, it is possible to speak in general terms of potential subjective and social effects through characteristics that constitute a population living in a given territory, following historical and cultural precepts.[760] In that sense, speaking of subjectivity and the social bond rather than the individual and society allows for that versatility in analysing, discussing, and, more importantly, thinking of the conditions of living in Mexico today.[761]

> Violence has been a characteristic mark of our time; without a doubt, we see how it has affected the social bond. We witness varied responses and new symptoms that imprint their characteristic feature and their effect on subjectivity. We can think exercising violence or witnessing it is a form of resounding and silent jouissance in the subject. We ask, how have we transited beyond the pleasure principle to a condition of violence, assault, corruption, drugs, and death… transiting from Eros to Thanatos? Presently, subjects have put distance between their kin regardless of their well-being or that of their community; social bonds are fractured and broken, there is a lack of interest in the other, one's desire is ignored, or, even more, the encounter with love has become tarnished, few believe in it. It is a time of desolation, grief, and scepticism. On the other hand, it is a time of disappeared people, of death, of mass graves full of unknown bodies, of exclusion and marginality.[762]

Although veering towards the extreme side, Hernández Valderrama's thoughts are essential to note the order of trauma perceived in Mexico. One that "seizes the word, leaves a vacuum, is the surprise of the unthought that desubjectivises our being".[763] Miguel Gutiérrez Peláez coincides with Hernández Valderrama's conception of violence, as he argues that writing about violence cannot be reduced to listing the violent acts or activities.

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as normalised practice in judicial proceedings… Groups, groupings, institutions and movements of victims that constitute themselves and institutive axes of our society". Manero Brito, *Op. Cit.,* p. 21.

[760] Regardless of how flawed, imaginary, or problematic these are.

[761] In *Ethics, Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, Foucault states that it is necessary to stand critically before the present in order to say what happens and what we are *today.* This, he argues, must be done without granting the "ease, somewhat dramatic and theatrical of asserting that this moment that we are in is, in the deepest of the night, the one of biggest doom, or in the blossoming of the day, where the sun triumphs, etc. No, it is a day like all others or rather a day that is never completely the same as all others". Michel Foucault, *Estética, ética y hermenéutica,* España, Paidós, 1999, p. 325.

[762] Hernández Valderrama, *Op. Cit.,* p. 2522.

[763] *Ibid.,* p. 2523.

Nor, he states, can it be reduced to the academic contributions regarding the reproduction of horror—something that the different media does well on its own.

Keeping a registry, systematisation, and description of violences does not imply bordering them, Gutiérrez Peláez adds. Addressing violence and writing about it, instead, requires offering the opportunity to understand it and its acts and experiences—understanding that it produces as much fascination as revulsion—hopefully leading to possible courses of action for social change. It is particularly so because violences tend to settle themselves to phallic-capitalist logic in that they are always susceptible to increasing quantities. That is, there is no horizon in which the ultimate violence, the violence of all violences, could take place. This, Peláez states, is an artificial zenith because new units could always be added to them.[764]

> More units, acts and elements of violence could infinitely be added to violences, in the same way that zeros can always be added to any figure. There is no ultimate figure for violence. That is why its description never finds a point of knotting. Sometimes, on the contrary, it produces the effect of increasing the threshold of tolerance of a subject, a people, or a country. That is how, in the daily bombardment of violences, some have become commonplace and go unnoticed in the landscape of habitual horrors. Hence, they would require acts that exceed that attained threshold to shake us until we become habituated to them and so on.[765]

However, Gutiérrez Peláez notes that this is not the case regarding the subjective effects of those violences. There is, he says, no correspondence between the objective magnitude of a given act of violence and the subjective impact it may produce; the logic of the register of the effects of violence is different to the social one. Thus, Gutiérrez Peláez explains that when the violent acts fit well into the language structure in terms of figures, signifiers and articulations, the effects on the subject can be elusive to the word, delving into a field "where the signifiers and discourse of the subject wavers to speak of that commotion that a determined event of violence could have provoked in him".[766]

Gutiérrez Peláez explains that in his clinical work with subjects with some type of symptom of psychological affectation produced by an event of violence in Colombia, he has come across two aspects: one, the non-correspondence between the magnitude of violence

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[764] Miguel Gutiérrez Peláez, "Los efectos singulares de las violencias generalizadas y sus consecuencias sobre el sujeto", in Uribe María Victoria and Parrini, Rodrigod, eds., *La violencia y su sombra*. *Aproximaciones desde Colombia y México,* Bogota, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Cuajimalpa, 2020, pp. 98-99.
[765] *Ibid.,* p. 99.
[766] *Ibid.,* pp. 99-100.

and its effects on symptoms or alterations; and two, the onset of a dimension of the unnameable, that which is not completely knotted into language.[767] Peláez then focuses on the experience of trauma and the forms it takes subjectively. His clinical example serves as a bridge between trauma and another crucial instance for Mexico, that of the victim-victimiser dichotomy mentioned above.

He narrates the experience of a patient he attended in Bogota in 2007, a soldier of the Colombian Armed Forces. This soldier, Peláez recounts, was considered almost a hero by his peers, "a merciless subject that did not hesitate when faced with having to do 'the hard work'. He could follow the commanders' orders to which his battalion peers trembled".[768] However, an event—in which he was instructed to kill a man that they had tortured and interrogated—produced in the soldier an image of the man opening and closing his mouth like a fish when stabbed in the abdomen by the soldier that returned in his nightmares and diurnal ruminations accompanied by immense anguish. This image led him to anxiety crises and violent discharges against himself and others and, eventually, to being committed to a psychiatric institution.[769]

> The mouth of that body will produce for him a cut in his screen of the world, a hesitation of his phantasmatic structuring. In the same way in which when a mouth opens, it allows a glimpse into a deep hole (it is a gate to another dimension of the body), the image likewise produces a hole in the fabric of his reality.[770]

Thus, Gutiérrez Peláez coincides with Hernández Valderrama's approximation to trauma, asserting trauma as something that introduces a hole in the symbolic realm that can never be captured by language. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the subject will not be able to produce words surrounding the hole of trauma in an attempt to anchor it to the signifying chain and thus return it to the symbolic register.[771] As noted by Maren Ulriksen-Viñar in the case of Latin American dictatorships of the previous century, extreme violence and aggression prevent the subject from thinking about them. Horror, she continues, "was introduced and inscribed in the psychism as a mark, without articulating itself as a signifier tale that gives an account of the nature of this irruption".[772]

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[767] *Ibid.,* p. 100.
[768] *Loc. Cit.*
[769] *Ibid.,* pp. 100-101.
[770] *Ibid.,* p. 101.
[771] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[772] Maren Ulriksen-Viñar, "La transmisión del horror", Puget, J., Kaës, R., eds., *Violencia de Estado y psicoanálisis*, Buenos Aires, Grupo Editorial Lumen, 2006, p. 122.

Emphatically, trauma is considered a singular experience. Moreover, there is no possible "generalisation of the psychological effects that it can produce in a subject a potentially traumatic experience".[773] It is significant to note that, one, it is not necessarily the most violent, cruel, or dramatic situation that the subject will recognise as the initial traumatic event;[774] and, two, that a situation lived in the past can become traumatic by the effect of a posterior experience. The last one may lack the properly traumatic characteristics but re-signifies the previous one, turning it traumatic. This is seen in the Freudian concept of *Nächtraglichkeit*, as differed action or effect of trauma.[775]

However singular or subjective trauma is, the common denominator is the same as the one proper to the social bond: language, discourse, the [im]possibility of employing words to convey the experience of violence and cruelty. In this regard, Goldstein explains that in the social bonds, the traumatic "appears as a consequence of the actions of power that demolish the collective subject. It is the remainder of organised violence in an effective discourse, meaning that it achieves the 'full' identification of the masses with the ideals. When the identification is partial, to an aspect, the mass is divided, and it is possible to transform what has been instituted".[776]

Manero Brito states that it is not solely the action or event of individual or collective violence that can generate trauma but also the climate of terror and fear induced in people's daily lives. Moreover, thinking of this implies, for the author, questioning whether the violent criminal act—physical or psychological—is the terminal phase of a much more complex process. It is an exercise that introjects an "irrational, terrible, and perverse power that acts over the victim beyond the times sustained in the juridical definition of crime".[777]

> What stalks the subject is not the reality of the traumatic event but the inability to process it. Terror would then be the symptom of that unprocessed event that is obsessively present, and the mind does not leave behind, but neither is it translated into recollection. A true paradox, according to Acosta, for it is the experience of the absence of experience.[778]

The experiences of trauma and the victim are linked in their relationship with language. On the one hand, it implies the impossibility of incorporating the experience

[773] Gutiérrez Peláez, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 102-103.
[774] Gutiérrez Peláez contextualises this in Freud's examination of war neuroses.
[775] *Ibid.,* p. 104.
[776] Goldstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 927.
[777] Manero Brito, *Op. Cit.,* p. 91.
[778] Camila de Gamboa and María Victoria Uribe, "Presentación", in De Gamboa, Camila and Uribe, María Victoria, eds., *Los silencios de la guerra,* Bogota, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2017, p. 18.

subjectively—through tales, fictions, or other verbal utterances. On the other hand, it suggests identifying or naming one as such and the corresponding subjective positions and semblances of meaning that can stem from these. In both senses, in dealing with language, there is a wound concerning the inaccessible—known or unknown—that pushes to be heard.

However, as stated in the quotation above, trauma, the traumatic event, and horror are, above all, connected by memory or its absence. If they appear, the images and affects of the event do so instead of the actual event; the event is relived in and through the mnemonic apparatus, which, in turn, relates to language. However, they do not do so through a straightforward expression. As Acosta explains, what returns is not only the violent event but the unprocessed reality of that violence. According to Freud, as developed by Acosta, in the traumatic neurosis[779] there are events that the mind can simply not leave behind but, at the same time, cannot translate into memory.

> Trauma is nothing else than an experience of the absence of experience, the inscription of an absence that nevertheless becomes an untraceable place, of the compulsive return of that which cannot be remembered.[780]

Mexico has lived through a convulsive past whose events, ruptures, and losses have not been adequately narrated nor assimilated into history; those memories reside only in some. More recently, the convulsive past has given way to a nearly unliveable present filled with disappearances, feminicides, murders of environmental defenders, social and community leaders, journalists, and activists, and overall so much death presented in increasingly extreme forms.

The country has become so filled with absences that they constitute their own map. Still, the living make their way through daily life, navigating the different maps of death, absence, silence, and life that constitute Mexico today. Making sense of these maps, the crumbling road that can lead to life rather than death becomes exhausting. At this point in history, even when life continues, the country in shambles continues, and life goes on, it is time to question what is really continuing and what, in that continuance, we are taking with us.

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[779] Further analyses into contemporary types of subjectivity are necessary to understand the current relationships to trauma.

[780] María del Rosario Acosta López, “Hacia una gramática del silencio: Benjamin y Felman”, in De Gamboa, Camila and Uribe, María Victoria, eds., *Los silencios de la guerra,* Bogota, Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2017, p. 90.

Is it living? After more than 15 years of "war", the dynamics have been altered to such an extent that violence and cruelty have become another fixture in the otherwise picturesque country. Or is it surviving? Are Mexicans today survivors of a still ongoing war? Whilst surviving would imply an end to the event, at the same time, thinking of today's inhabitants of the country in terms of surviving can catalyse a subjective positioning other than the victim, potential victim, and, eventually, hopefully, even survivor. Marcelo Viñar stresses, through Alain Badiou's thoughts, the importance of resignification:

> If the executioner is an abjection, the condition of the victim is of no more value. What is properly human in someone destined for the slaughterhouse is his almost senseless and nearly unthinkable resistance that, through an outrageous effort, he is obstinate in continuing to be himself and not suiting himself to the place assigned for the victim. The work of subjectivation is the fight between the assigned place and the assumed place.[781]

Perhaps more than the actual, still in the process of being articulated, subjectivities and social bonds ensued by a country at war against itself, it would be more convenient to look at the subjectivities to come from the perspective of a future that can still be, of that which can come after surviving. For that, a recollection of what has happened is inevitably necessary. However, the supposition here is that, as it is still happening and the event is not yet finished, memory can serve as much as a rupture as a look towards the past. Thus, it is an out-of-joint memory of what will come, as discussed in chapter one.

The following section will continue discussing the victim and trauma and incorporate it into the ongoing discussion of memory presented since the introduction. This will allow exploring possible configurations of subjectivity and social bonds in contemporary Mexico and the forms of resistance to disappearing murderous powers. As this project has its ground on a particular mode of violence—images and visuality—it is contested throughout the project that not only do we see violence given the sociocultural characteristics of our time, but that we, in turn, construct the ways we see given a complex array of subjective positionings and bonds. In that sense, as Viñar establishes, we can look at resistance to the images of violence and visuality as ways of resignification and subjectivation from other ways than the places we are dwelling in right now—the assigned or assumed places.

[781] Marcelo Viñar, "Violencia política extrema y transmisión intergeneracional", in Glocer Fiorini, Leticia, comp., *Los laberintos de la violencia,* Buenos Aires, Lugar Editorial, 2008, p. 140.

Freud used the metaphor of the Wunderblock to explain the operations of the unconscious and the inscription of traces. The Wunderblock is a wax tablet placed in a cardboard frame with a thin transparent sheet attached at the top. This sheet consists of two layers—an upper transparent celluloid film and a lower thin waxed paper—that can be separated from each other.[782] The remarkable aspect of this tablet, and where the analogy with the psychic apparatus stands, is that, even when the covering sheet is lifted and the writing vanishes from the paper, there are permanent traces indented into the wax slab. These traces can be legible in a proper light.

Our psychic apparatus achieves what the supplementary external mechanisms cannot. It can receive limitless new perceptions and create lasting traces, albeit not unalterable ones.[783] In *Freud and the Scene of Writing,* Derrida explores Freud's metaphors regarding memory and the mystic writing pad to explain how this can be taken beyond a metaphor, as the model and act of writing. Derrida notes the compelling Freudian hypothesis of "contact-barriers" and "fraying" of the breaking of a path when seen as a metaphorical model and not "as a neurological description".[784] A trace as memory, Derrida writes with Freud:

> Is not a pure fraying that might be retrieved at any time as a simple presence, it is the impalpable and invisible difference between frayings. We thus know already that psychical life is neither the transparency of meaning nor the opacity

[782] "To make use of the Mystic Pad, one writes upon the celluloid portion of the covering-sheet which rests on the wax slab. For this purpose no pencil or chalk is necessary, since the writing does not depend on material being deposited on the receptive surface. It is a return to the ancient method of writing on tablets of clay or wax: a pointed stilus scratches the surface, the depressions upon which constitute the 'writing'. In the case of the Mystic Pad this scratching is not effected directly, but through the medium of the covering-sheet. At the points which the stilus touches, it presses the lower surface of the waxed paper on to the wax slab, and the grooves are visible as dark writing upon the otherwise smooth whitish-grey surface of the celluloid. If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering-sheet from the wax slabby a light pull, starting from the free lower end. The close contact between the waxed paper and the wax slab at the places which have been scratched (upon which the visibility of the writing depended) is thus brought to an end and it does not recur when the two surfaces come together once more". Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works, Volume XIX (1923-1925)*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1950, p. 229.

[783] Mercedes Fernández Ayarzagoitia, *Lazos en memoria: El acontecimiento im|posible,* Mexico City, Colegio de Saberes, 2017*.,* p. 55.

[784] "Fraying, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to the effraction. The path is broken, cracked, fracta, frayed". Derrida and Mehlman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 77.

> of force but the difference in the exertion of forces. As Nietzsche had already said.[785]

Néstor Braunstein notes the importance of Freud's mystic writing pad as a model for trauma when the stylus presses upon the paper and wax tablet, creating an indentation or perforation. Like Derrida, Braunstein sees a model for understanding trauma in the writing apparatus. The superficial protective layers that allow the registers of experience to be stored underneath them are torn. "The brutality of the psychic impact makes it impossible for the traces to be conserved in the transparent waxed paper (preconscious) or the underlying wax (unconscious)".[786]

Braunstein suggests that the waxed paper be considered a figuration of the psychic tegument. There is an excessive stimulus in piercing the paper with a sharp object, rendering it impossible to symbolise. "Every preparation from fright, every prevention, any attempt at subtracting oneself or closing the eyes as in the movies when watching a horror movie, has been exceeded by the intrusion of an uncanny *jouissance* of the Other, the executioner".[787] Importantly, as explained before, and in the same manner as Freud explains the external or internal perceptions, trauma stems not only from the outside; the subject colours it, says Braunstein, with his own fantasies or ghosts. From the collusion between the new event and the previous structure, is that the more or less devastating effect depends.[788]

> The traumatic episode reduces the mirrors where the I looked at itself to dust; it does so by cutting the knot tying the living body to the image and the proper name. The knot of the symbolic, imaginary, and real.[789]

According to Braunstein, silence, one's own and the other's, around trauma, kills.[790] Due to the inability to be apprehended into the symbolic system, trauma cannot transit into oblivion. It will remain "as the unspeakable and untranslatable of the text of a life".[791] This is a complex, and perhaps even contradictory, articulation because trauma belongs to the Real register outside the articulation of language and, as such, lacks meaning. Braunstein warns

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[785] *Ibid.,* p. 78.
[786] Néstor Braunstein, "El trauma y la memoria de los sobrevivientes (Trauma and memory of the survivors)", in Glocer Fiorini, Leticia, comp., *Los laberintos de la violencia,* Buenos Aires, Lugar Editorial, 2008, p 181.
[787] *Loc. Cit.*
[788] *Ibid.,* p. 182.
[789] *Ibid.,* p. 183.
[790] *Loc. Cit.*
[791] *Ibid.,* p. 187.

that trauma can perpetuate itself in joyous autophagy and, by its condition of becoming narratable, can become overloaded with meaning.[792]

Addressing the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Braunstein mentions that a common phrase was "I am not myself any longer", exemplifying the displaced self.[793] However, even when trauma has certain patterns that allow identifying its place on the subject, and there are repetitions of the subject's acts and discourse that give an account of that trauma, the question of how to locate trauma in situations that have important differences as the ones mentioned above.

Whilst the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 pertain to specific contexts and, as such, have notable differences, there are some similarities to consider—if only by difference to the other events listed by Braunstein. The psychoanalyst lists these examples from a survival perspective—there can only be trauma in the living. It is significant to pause on the implication of living and dying through different events that can leave different types of scars, not only on the subject but on the bonds, however much singular trauma is.

There are remarkable differences when considering events of this magnitude. The atomic bombs and the terrorist attacks constitute *events,* as explained in chapter one. Unimaginable, incomprehensible (until looked at in retrospect), and bringing with them profound changes for subjects and groups. However, the Shoah constitutes one unfathomable event made up of many more that were silenced and concealed. In a way, the dictatorships in South America worked this way as an open secret that caused more fear and terror in society.

> Far from the totalitarian power's pretence of depositing what it wishes to disappear in the [concentration] camp and, in turn, make the camp itself disappear from society, negate it, camp and society are part of the same plot. The concentration camps, as a negated known reality, as open secrets, are efficient in disseminating terror. The authentic secret, a true unawareness, would have the effect of a naïve passivity but never the paralysis and dejection engendered by terror. What is half known is what terrorizes, that which entails a secret that cannot be unveiled.[794]

Even when trauma can take as many forms as there are subjects, and no one experience can be said to be worse than another for a subject—that lives and carries it—, there are experiences that, because of their extremeness and prolonged occurrence,

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[792] *Loc. Cit.*
[793] *Ibid.,* p. 190.
[794] Calveiro, Poder y desaparición, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 90-91.

happen to the social bonds that are not limited to a subject or groups of subjects. There are events whose magnitude profoundly affects the constitution of the social bonds that shape referents that—however questionably—define a society, a nation, or a State.

Trauma is subjectively constituted, but can it be lived collectively? This question guides the text[s] to follow and refers to what has been written to this point. It is perhaps not that each Mexican, in their own way, is traumatised. However brutal violence and its images are in the country, there is no possible way to ascertain that they have a traumatic effect on everyone. Nevertheless, trauma can be shared or, as Juana Kovalskys sustains, extended to other members of society.

> The damage produced by institutionalised violence towards concrete subjects is extended to the members of society as a whole, to the structures that hold them, the norms that dictate their coexistence, and the institutions that regulate civic life based on values and principles that were hegemonic. It is a process of profound alteration of political, cultural, and social institutionality and, as such, cannot be thought of only in relation to direct victims.[795]

From Kovalskys' argument, we can gather that in events of extreme and sustained violence—such as the Shoah, the South American dictatorships, and Mexico's war on drugs—it is not sufficient to look at the direct victims of violence. Not only does the category of the victim need to be expanded or adapted to hold, represent, and contain the wide variety of victims—that may not identify themselves as secondary or tangential victims—but the whole of society is also touched or marked in some way or other. That is, as much as violence is not an isolated or singular event in the country, neither is trauma.

Goldstein argues that, when analysing the problem of violence, the key aspect is discerning the indispensable violence—that which constitutes the subject—from the violence of the cruelty that, on the contrary, desubjectivises. Where the first one makes the subject responsible for their acts and pushes to creation, and Eros predominates, the second, in charge of Thanatos, divides and destroys.[796] Thus, Goldstein differentiates between the deadly, "that corrodes the soul and the body, from the malignant that intentionally seeks destruction through cruelty or the cruel power".[797]

> The social and individual events of evil are organised in discourse, but their action is always disruptive of the discourse and symbolic law; they destroy the individual memory and the historical collective continuity. Only an *a posteriori*

[795] Juana Kovalskys, "Trauma Social, Modernidad e Identidades Sustraídas: Nuevas Formas de Acción Social", in *Psykhe,* vol. 15, no. 2, p. 14.
[796] Goldstein, Reflexiones sobre el mal…, *Op. Cit.,* p. 932.
[797] *Ibid.,* pp. 931-932.

> nomination can reinstate the discursive plot and allow "speaking" again of the endured trauma; this happened with the "Shoah": nominative event of what has no name, the abject, abhorrent, and irrevocable.[798]

Recalling Braunstein's statement that silence around trauma kills, speaking is indispensable to confront and construct a different future. Not only the existence of violent and cruel events and circumstances—that may or may not lead to trauma—constitutes the degree of the problem. It is how what was lived, experienced, and survived is incorporated, addressed, and processed. Evidently, with the psychoanalytically oriented nature of this project, one such confrontation with trauma is speaking, enunciating. However, the lines between the subject who directly experiences violence, the ones that inhabit the bond where one could potentially be subjected to it, and the complicated conception of the victim that may include potential and actual victimisers demand a multisided speech.

Continuing with Braunstein's thoughts, trauma may not kill; the very existence of trauma implies survival. However, silence can kill in perpetuating the rupture, the repetitions, and the destitution. "It is the lack of access to the word that the unbearable episode returns in nightmares, that invasion of the real, insensitive to the need to keep sleeping. That is why the victim needs to speak, write, find echoes of his pain, and exteriorise the interior. Testify".[799] For this to happen, the *other* is implied. For one to speak, there must be one to listen.

Mexico has lived through bursts of violence and cruelty for most of its history.[800] More recently, these bursts have become so frequent and extreme that it is hard to distinguish them as bursts. Remarkably, since 2006, bursts of violence and cruelty are daily occurrences. There are critical, strong voices that speak through the chaos, commotions, and endless stream of violent events. These are the voices of mothers, fathers, and families looking and searching for their disappeared family member, victim collectives, indigenous communities and their articulations, and members of the civil society. Every single one of these is experiencing violence and cruelty differently—every one of these has a particular thing to say.

When considering violent contexts such as Mexico's, the multiplicity of events entails multiple voices claiming recognition and justice. All these are part of the work of remembrance; therefore, a country's memory cannot be considered purely individual. Psychoanalyst René Käes identifies three types of memory, "the subject's one in the

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[798] *Ibid.,* p. 933.
[799] Braunstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 183.
[800] This has been the case even before Mexico was named as such, ever since Spanish colonialism.

singularity of his story, the species' one (which Freud designated as the archaic inheritance of humanity), the trans-subjective ensembles that sustain our identity and our groups' belongings".[801]

According to Käes, all these memories interact with each other but are unique in their configuration and possess their own logic. There is an essential distinction for each of these memories, according to Käes: the difference between historical time and psychic time. Historical time entails the orderly chronological succession of events and, in that sense, can be annihilated by its successors. Psychic time, on the other hand, cannot be annihilated and is "parallelly maintained to what has become, be it in a purely virtual manner, be it in a real simultaneity".[802] For the psychoanalyst, the work of memory cannot be considered solely from an individual angle, especially in catastrophic situations of social violence.[803]

Kaës presents four propositions regarding collective memory in the relationship between the singular and social framings of memory and the psychic functions of collective memory. The first is that, through narratives or monuments, collective memory registers the experiences lived by the community. Collective memory preserves and retains both what each person wanted to dispose of and what does not belong to them: shared emotions, crisis, that which belongs to the bond that makes them possible or that is an effect of them. The second is that collective memory restores what everyone could have repressed or desired but hides the representations of experiences that are only returnable through the individual ghost or fantasy.[804] The third, collective memory contains recollections of experiences that the subject has not lived but are transmitted to them by identification or *anaclisis*.[805] The fourth, collective memory participates in the work of construction of individual memory.[806]

> Therefore, a part of memory can only work in a group manner, in collectivity, in institutions. The group intervenes to conserve individual memory, stimulate it, sustain the repression or erasure, and propose the elements for its construction. It is the function of mythical tales, legends and stories; it is the function of the historian as a spokesperson for the memory of the group.[807]

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[801] René Kaës, "Rupturas catastróficas y trabajo de la memoria", in Puget, J., Kaës, R., eds., *Violencia de Estado y psicoanálisis,* Buenos Aires, Grupo Editorial Lumen, 2006, p. 174.
[802] *Loc. Cit.*
[803] *Ibid.,* p. 177.
[804] *Ibid.,* p. 178.
[805] *Ibid.,* pp. 178-179.
[806] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[807] *Loc. Cit*.

The remembrance of past events is transmitted from generation to generation, according to Käes, and they constitute both culture and the subject's psychic life. Myths, tales, rites, religion, and art are each "according to their own modalities, psychoanalytical materials when they can be places of memory and of the formulation of the unconscious, of deposits or vehicles of each story".[808] Furthermore, the psychoanalyst continues, they can protect against the resurfacing of horror. Even in social catastrophes, they are never entirely disjointed or torn; they can be slowly reconstructed. "They are necessary to the formation of individual memory, so much as for the formation of collective memory".[809]

> The prolonged disappearance of recollections of lived events, their lengthy subterraneous existence in oblivion, and the work of producing deformed substitution—hidden places of memory—operate during the silence and turmoil of their return. The past would exist when recognised thanks to its return to the present, the founding oblivion constructed by the recognition of the existence of the unconscious, past and oblivion incorporated to the present.[810]

This last idea is in line with Braunstein's claim that "there can only be forgetting of what there is memory".[811] Remembering and forgetting are intrinsic to one another, for there to be one, the possibility, the reality, of the other is inevitable. When coming out of a social catastrophe, Käes continues, some individuals try to repress the events whilst others keep the wounds open, the pain, and the horror alive. Nevertheless, no group, institution or society is without memory or work of historicising. "Societies that sustain deathly utopias reject memory and historicity".[812]

In Argentina, for instance, being the subject of the text of which Käes is one of the compilators, "the specificity of the trauma caused by the dictatorship is the mute disappearance".[813] It is revealed in the terror by imposing silence over the word. The hole caused by forced disappearances affects not only the present generation but all the generations to come.[814] Whilst the forced disappearances have different modes of operation in Mexico's context today than it did during the period comprising the dictatorships and dirty wars in the region, they nevertheless have the cruel foundation in common of denying

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[808] *Ibid.,* p. 183.
[809] *Loc. Cit.*
[810] *Loc. Cit.*
[811] Braunstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 195.
[812] The "do not remember" is not ordered in these societies by the repression of horror but by the obliteration of history and experience. Käes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 185.
[813] Everyone needed to be silent to ensure survival. *Ibid.,* p. 184.
[814] *Loc. Cit.*

information on the whereabouts of the person, the possibility of giving their bodies a resting place and inflicting a terrifying wound on the social bond.

> The forced disappearance of persons is a phenomenon that affects identity and sense: it attacks the structure of identities, whose foundations it dynamites; it subjects language to one of its limits, forcing it to situate itself in the place where things are disassociated from the words that name them. That is why the figure of the detained-disappeared is, in many senses, a difficult figure to think and live. It speaks of individuals surrendered to a regime of invisibility, of negated facts, of erased bodies, of improbable things, of the construction of spaces of exception. It borders the impossible, it is entirely within the unthinkable, and it is only in the conjugation with diffused semantic terms that we can refer to the detained-disappeared and their places.[815]

This project has not focused on forced disappearances, so an in-depth analysis will not be developed. However, the magnitude and sheer cruelty of this problem and the extent to which it is embedded in the Mexican imaginary have disastrous effects on the formation of subjectivity and social bond, which is central to the project. It modifies the apprehension and approximations of death and mourning. It underlines the visible in the invisible and the invisible in the visible. The extent of the absence constitutes a dense presence, one translated into steps taken whilst searching for them, uncountable hours thinking of where they are, and vast holes left on the social fabric.

> "Disappearance," writes Edelberto Torres Rivas, "is even more cruel than public assassination, since it raises the perception of danger by placing it in an imaginary world, unsure but probable, created by the possibility that the disappeared person is alive. While one suspects that the disappeared person may be dead, nobody knows the truth. Doubt, prolonged over time, is a highly productive way of sowing fear".[816]

Alongside the fear, the state of uncertainty, and the inability to mourn the disappeared in Mexico, the search and protests for the disappeared are further met with the utmost resistance and impunity by the State.[817] The routes that families, groups, and

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[815] Gabriel Gatti explores forced disappearances in Argentina and Uruguay, so the language he uses is proper to these contexts. Gabriel Gatti, "Las narrativas del detenido-desaparecido (o de los problemas de la representación ante las catástrofes sociales)", in *CONfines*, vol. 2, no. 4, p. 28.
[816] Franco, *Op. Cit.,* p. 192.
[817] Although the Mexican context is complex and some question the State's implication on forced disappearances—placing the responsibility, instead, on other actors such as the *narco*—the State is implied and is responsible. According to the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons, a "forced disappearance is considered to be the act of depriving a person or persons of his or their freedom, in whatever way, perpetrated by agents of the state or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the state, followed by an absence of information or a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the

collectives have to transit to get any accompaniment to locate their disappeared are plagued with obstacles, disrespect, and neglect. Much like the mothers in Argentina and Chile, the collectives in Mexico search the potential sites of unmarked mass graves or other locations for the remains of their loved ones. These groups are constantly under threat by organised crime.[818]

As mentioned above, for Käes, art contains, formulates, and serves as a deposit and vehicle for stories—known and unknown. As shown below, with artistic examples, art can facilitate giving words to trauma. It can be not only the place for confronting but also rememorating. For its very nature, a disappearance denotes invisibility, evanescence, absence, and other words that try to grasp the sudden not-being-there of bodies. There cannot be an image of the disappearance, as there are of the many other instances depicted throughout the text. The denseness of the disappearance, however, constitutes a force of its own, a constant presence. Furthermore, there are ways of materialising, visualising, and representing disappearances.

In Luz María Sánchez's work, "Vis [un]necessary force", we can see the exploration of other representations for the search for the disappeared. Her work "explores how the civil population survives amongst extreme violence performed by legit and non-legit groups of power in Mexico".[819] V.[u]nf_4 is a multi-channel acoustic installation made with recordings of the search activities of the collective Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte in Los Mochis, Sinaloa, in Northern Mexico.[820] The collective is composed of family members of the disappeared, "especially women, (mothers, wives, sisters, daughters), who frequently make journeys into the countryside around Los Mochis to look for signs of human remains or clandestine graves".[821]

> Las Rastreadoras de El Fuerte go on search trips twice a week, looking for the remains of family members and other individuals, victims of forced disappearance. *V.[u]nf_4* is also comprised of a two-channel sound sculpture and at least five tools shaped in a "T" form a sculptural component that

whereabouts of that person, thereby impeding his or her recourse to the applicable legal remedies and procedural guarantees". The Organization of American States, "the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons" (FROM, 10 August, 2023: https://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-60.html).

[818] Oscar López, "Mother's Day brings only grief for those seeking Mexico's disappeared" (FROM, 13 August, 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/10/mexico-disappeared-mothers-day).

[819] Luz María Sánchez, "VIS. [UN]NECESSARY FORCE" (FROM, 14 August, 2023: https://www.vis-fuerzainnecesaria.org/vis-un-necessary-force).

[820] *Loc. Cit.*

[821] MUAC, "Vis. Fuerza (in)necesaria_4" (FROM, 14 August, 2023: https://muac.unam.mx/exposicion/vis.-fuerza-in-necesaria_4?lang=en).

> Rastreadoras de El Fuerte use to drill holes in the ground and detect the smell of human remains, which then indicates where they should dig.[822]

Sánchez's work breaks the barriers of [in]visibility associated with the disappeared not only in a different, original manner by recording the sounds of searching. She creates an encounter of specific noises with the voices and chatter of the Rastreadoras with a profound silence that envelops the situation. It intertwines the noises, silences, and absence of both death, life, and disappearance—that are alive until their bodies are found.[823] The steps they take searching for their disappeared, the tools used to search, the technical knowledge needed to do so, all create their own sound, and signal the aliveness of the disappeared in the memories embodied in the arduous task of their loved ones continue looking for them.

Many brilliant artworks give a sort of visibility by bringing forth the presences whilst underlining the absences and losses of the disappeared from many visual and textual perspectives. They vary in their nature, composition, and place of exhibition. However, it is significant to note that most of these works include a collective component, be it from the perspective or the involvement of the family members—such as Sánchez's work or the collective Footprints of Memory[824]—the aesthetic materialisation of the problem in ways that reach wider audiences—different audio-visual works have been done with this issue at their core—, and other artistic and cultural elements present on the paths of remembrance and justice.

Other visual representations, even when not considered art, constitute a cultural register of great importance for transmitting stories and memories. This is notable, for instance, in the photographs that the family members of the disappeared create posters and banners to look for them and claim their return. The selection of the photograph they use, the care in selecting it, the frame, what their faces tell us, and the text accompanying the

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[822] Luz María Sánchez, *Op. Cit.*

[823] In 2015, filmmaker Ilana Coleman interviewed Lucía Baca, mother of disappeared Alejandro Moreno Baca, who, when asked if she thought her son could still be alive, responded: "I cannot kill him in my mind. For me, he is still alive. When I say he is dead it means that I am killing him. It would mean I buried him. So no, I can't allow that for myself". Quotation shared by the filmmaker.

[824] The exhibition has been presented in many countries, including the UK, and "features the shoes of mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, wives and husbands, who continue the long journey in the search of their loved ones. The shoes have been donated from all over Mexico and beyond, by the relatives of the disappeared. They have been worn down as they have walked the country, demanding to know the whereabouts of their loved ones. The soles of these shoes, which have been to Ministries and mass graves, on marches and to meetings, have been engraved in Mexico City with messages to represent their search". Aberystwyth University, "Footprints of Memory" (FROM, 15 August, 2023: https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/news/archive/2017/03/title-198942-en.html).

photograph brings the disappeared closer, and, as has been argued throughout the project, their image touches us. The implications of these images—in terms of psychic impressions or affects—are of another order than the ones displayed earlier. The image of the disappeared, in the hands of their families and loved ones, hopes, cares and grieves rather than promotes melancholy, horror, fear, and dismay. This last idea will be addressed further in the next section.

The artworks mentioned above, the demonstrations and protests made by family members, groups and collectives demanding the appearance of the disappeared, claiming justice, all have in common precisely that: in common. They recognise that this is not a problem of one or a few. Forced disappearances are tearing the social bonds. People do not just vanish or disappear; they are not just erased. Even the word "disappearance" is insufficient to convey the act, the event, and its consequences and ramifications.

> We are confronting a *new state of being*, in a previously unknown place. We had thought that within the architecture of existence it would not be possible to find a place between life and death, and that if it did exist (purgatory, limbo, ghosts, spectres…), it would be of short duration. But disappearance invents a perpetually unstable space, a kind of *permanent liminality*. Besides, it is unresolvable: there is not even the certainty of the death of the disappeared subject to bring closure. It is clear that this is an enormous catastrophe, a permanent dissociation: an entity that had had the status of individual-as-citizen is expelled *beyond the pale*, where previously tramps and scum were sent and, like them, converted into an NN. They cease to be citizens and become the disappeared. Therefore, the verb *desaparecer* (disappear) is not conjugated with the verb *estar* [to indicate a temporary condition] but with the verb *ser* [to indicate a state]: "When they tell me *'tu [sic.] estás desaparecido*', it's not actually '*estás* desaparecido' [you are someone who has disappeared], but '*és um desaparecido*' [you are one of the disappeared]". Nothing less than a new state of being is created ("You are one of the disappeared, neither living nor dead", "A non-person, a thing that doesn't know whether it exists or not"). An unprecedented status, "a new abyss".[825]

This returns to the issue of social catastrophes—of which forced disappearances are emblematic—in which Käes states that trauma destroys confidence and turns victims into strangers who cannot assume ownership of their history. It is the external memory, the collective memory, hence, that searches for a sense to protect against the resurfacing of horror, against repetition and the silence of death.[826] A memory of this kind, one that faces

[825] Gabriel Gatti, "The Detained-Disappeared: Civilizational Catastrophe, the Collapse of Identity and Language", in *RCCS Annual Review,* no. 3, p. 26.
[826] Käes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 187.

the events of the past, that maintains the wound open to avoid repetitions, that can restore the name and identities to the thousands of bodies—dead and disappeared—, and that forges new bonds cannot be an individual one. Even if there are singular experiences, recollections, and even archives, remembrance—looking towards truth and justice—has to be a collective task.

Death, by its very nature, argues Mamphela Ramphele, is a public affair: "the death of a person can only be registered as a memory by another".[827] Even when prohibited from doing so, Ramphele continues, the memories of these deaths are carried in the memories of those who live. "There is no such thing as a private death. Death attracts the public as both witness and participant. News of a death spreads very rapidly. Thus, a wider public is incorporated into the death rituals-an affirmation of the unification of humanity in a common destiny".[828]

For Meri Torras Francés and Michelle Gama Leyva, preserving memory implies having the means to transmit it. The authors then question whether we can understand the body as one of those means of transmitting memory. The body, Torras and Gama continue, "is a place in which history passes from one to another".[829] Importantly, they refer to the activism and social protest acts in Syria and Yemen, underlining that these began as public acts of mourning, "funerals that were converted into public acts of reproach".[830] The loss of a body, for the authors, "is established as a type of belonging, transmitting the loss to the present and tipping it over the own body in the public space, achieving thus make memory present".[831]

> When there is a negation of genocide or a massacre, or a negation of radical dispossession of a determined social group, a type of regulation of memory is given, which implies the issue of institutionalised memory: it is not a type of memory that has to do with cognitive content of the mind (in other words, the recollection can have or not a place in the mind of someone who directly experienced these destructions), but it is a memory that is maintained through a historical register, through discursive and transmissible media: documentation, images and archives, amongst others. In order to preserve the

[827] Mamphela Ramphele, "Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity", in Kleinman, Arthur, Das, Veena, Lock, Margaret, eds., *Social Suffering,* United States of America, The California University Press, 1997, p. 109.
[828] *Ibid.,* p. 110.
[829] Meri Torras Francés and Michelle Gama Leyva, "Un diálogo entre Judith Butler y Adriana Cavarero (Itinerario de resonancias)", in Saez Tajafuerce, Begonya, ed., *Cuerpo, memoria y representación. Adriana Cavarero y Judith Butler en diálogo,* Barcelona, Icaria editorial, 2014, p. 105.
[830] *Loc. Cit.*
[831] *Loc. Cit.*

> memory of the vulnerability of the bodies, a type of memorialisation is required and must be repeated and established across space and time; it can even be denominated a form of performativity: a performative memorialisation.[832]

To the possibility of memory, we must add the necessity of grieving and mourning—in itself and as an auxiliary to memory processes. As stated earlier, once a country with deep-rooted traditions honouring, remembering, and even celebrating death and the dead, the country now has more unnamed, unlocalised, and seen and unseen broken bodies. As Diéguez argues, we must think of the consequences of increased violent deaths, massacres, and forced disappearances and their effects on the continuity of funeral rites. It is necessary, Diéguez continues, to think of the traumas that the relentless violent deaths can cause on the symbolic tissue of society. Many ritual practices can no longer take place, for it is sometimes impossible to know where the body fell and where he was murdered, as well as the impossibility of recovering bodies and practising the most basic funerary rituals.

> Crying for the dead, mourning, and giving them a grave, as has been sustained by anthropological research, is an imperative from the world of the living: *rites de mort pour la paix des vivants* is the title of one of the works of the renowned anthropologist Louis-Vincent Thomas, in a way that explains the point of view from which rites are conducted not only to foster better rest to the dead but to grant peace for the living, "for us to continue being alive with their help".[833]

In the same way that memory and remembrance must be conducted in the public space, mourning must be sustained as a collective concern. According to Käes, "there is no strictly private mourning, even when the work of mourning is, as all psychic work, a creation that compromises the intimate singularity of each subject".[834] Derrida's view is that there can be no discourse "*on* 'the work of mourning' without taking part in it, without announcing or partaking in [*se faire part de*] death, and first of all in one's own death".[835] Thus, it is not solely that the act of mourning that can restore memory, the possibility of naming, or enunciating death. The work of mourning is not done outside of it. That is, one is implied in this work by its very possibility.

> There is thus no metalanguage for the language in which a work of mourning is at work. This is also why one should not be able to say anything about the work of mourning, anything about this subject, since it cannot become a theme, only another experience of mourning that comes to work over the one who intends to speak. To speak of mourning or of anything else. And that is why whoever

[832] *Ibid.,* p. 103.
[833] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 271.
[834] Käes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 184.
[835] Derrida *et al.*, "By Force of Mourning", in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 2, p. 172.

> thus works at the work of mourning learns the impossible-and that mourning is interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable.[836]

Regarding forced disappearances in the context of the work conducted in Argentina by his psychoanalyst colleagues, according to Käes, the work of mourning is not possible if it is not guided towards a political inscription and not just a social one. Speaking of the work conducted in Argentina, Käes states that "it is a collective and individual elaboration in the *après-coup* of a trauma without name, of an unthinkable loss, of a yet impossible mourning, taking into account the dimension of a society".[837] Of course, the mourning of the dead and the disappeared are different types of mourning.

Even when, as explained by Diéguez in the quotation above, there are difficulties in doing so when these are the result of acts of violence and cruelty, the existence of a body offers the possibility of giving it a place to rest, to remain there, and to *know* that they are there. In contrast, the lack of seeing the body, holding it, or burying it, the not knowing if the person is dead or alive, the state of ambivalence that does not make the loss any less profound, is a grief of another order.

> The rites linked to processes of forced disappearances do not solely pose the problem of the absence of a body, they hamper the real conviction of the death of that person that is still awaited because the disappeared takes a connotation of "dead-alive". It becomes a sort of ghost that torments the subject, on the one hand, because it has not been buried and, on the other, because of the preoccupations generated by not knowing the conditions that the absentee could be going through. In these cases, the mourning has to be elaborated by the absence, not death, "because there are no elements of the reality that allow for this elaboration, but there are to mourn the other who is not here". The lack of a cadaver impedes the disappeared from being installed as dead, but indeed as a "disappeared susceptible to appearing".[838]

One question that traverses these propositions on memory and mourning is who remembers and mourns and who is mourned and remembered. Arguing that memory and mourning can and should be public and collective events implies not only that they can and should be held in a public forum. Not even is it pausing to think of what happened—the truth—, who is the victim—remembrance—, and who will be held accountable—justice—, but altering these paradigms for the Mexican context has dishevelled even rites and rituals

[836] *Loc. Cit.*
[837] Käes, *Op. Cit.,* p. 184.
[838] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 272.

that have taken place for centuries. It implies confronting how I and others live in fear, loss, trauma, despair, and melancholy.

The constitutions of subjectivities and social bonds in the country are difficult to appreciate in the present at any moment in time. As has been argued before, it is mostly by looking back that the configurations and ramifications can be given a sense or meaning. It is contested here that not only will we appreciate them more clearly with a work of memory, but that the work of memory itself could place a dam of sorts that could channel them into less cruel, destructive, or deadly ones. We may find it difficult to face ourselves and the other in the midst of violence and cruelty, where almost everyone can be a victim or victimiser. So, perhaps, it is in the most straightforward act of questioning if we could mourn with or close to the other—with all the implications of victim-victimiser discourses this entails—that we could not only speak about the violences thrashing the country but also face them. And not just through their images.

Imagining survival

The previous sections addressed potential configurations of subjectivity and the social bond thinking of violence, memory, and mourning through a broad scope. One where, as Andrea Noble states, violence is the rule, not the exception.[839] This feeling of omnipresent violence has a *real* basis. However, it has been further constructed by its constantly framed portrayal in different media. The underlying interrogation is who is in what position as subjects and as a constitutive part of the social bond.

This chapter has tried to move the discussion from who enacts or receives violence to who can remember and be remembered, mourn and be mourned. This has to do in part because the complexity of the Mexican context obscures the varied actors that occupy one or more positions in the social, cultural, political, or economic circles. It is also because, through the muddiness of the situation, another assemblage of *being with* the other is necessary. Whether everywhere in Mexico people experience violence, cruelty, neglect, abjection, pain, loss, or despair in different manners and degrees, one thing that crosses all the experiences of violence—with all its respective singularities—is our systematic and

[839] Andrea Noble, "Introduction: Visual Culture and violence in Contemporary Mexico", in *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies,* vol. 24, no. 4, p. 429.

relentless confrontation with its images. We can observe an increase in both the acts and circulation of, in the words of Miguel Ángel Quemain:

> Grotesque, sad, and threatening images that form part of a world that openly challenges institutions […] They exhibit not only the overflowing human passions but also a strategy of dismantling individuality, reducing any trace of dignity to the level of extermination camps, in order to enforce strange directives that stem from a blender of images acquired through exposure to television and stories of cruelty and torture, which are ingrained in barbaric conquest spirits.[840]

As sustained throughout the dissertation, the shift towards more cruel ways of exercising violence has substantial implications for visuality. Images began corresponding with or reinforcing the transformations of extreme horror and pain inflicted on victims. Subjectively, many approximations and manifestations exist when seeing, witnessing, and experiencing violence. In a country plagued with real and imaginary violences, there are likewise countless approaches to living—or dying—with them. Diéguez questions how we interact with these images in terms of the will to see or to ignore, to "turn the page and make as if we are still living in the best of the worlds".[841]

Didi-Huberman argues that to explore the expression "the unconscious of the visible", the path is not that of its opposite (the invisible) but to a more complex—contradictory—phenomenology.[842] This would be what the event, *événement*, tries to designate: the visual symptom.[843] If we link this to the capitalist discourse, particularly what José Antonio Vergara Costas introduces when he says that "the symptom of social discontent forgets its origin, allowing the capitalist space to absorb discontent by adapting diversity and transforming it into the norm"[844] then this is to be connected, too, to the industry of the imaginary and subjectivity.

For Martínez Luna, the domination we are witnessing today has been reconfigured as domination through the regulation of the visible and invisible and, consequently, through the operations of the gaze: what we are enabled to look at and when we should look away.[845]

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[840] Miguel Ángel Quemain, "Nuevas imágenes para un viejo mundo", in, Mayer Foulkes, Benjamín, ed*., los cuerpos de la imagen,* Mexico City, Editorial 17, Centro de la Imagen, 2018*,* p. 326.
[841] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 90.
[842] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting image,* Unites States of America, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p. 29.
[843] *Loc. Cit.*
[844] José Antonio Vergara Costas, "Reflexiones filosóficas y psicoanalíticas en la era del discurso capitalista", in *Análisis,* vol. 49, no. 90, 2017, p. 171.
[845] Sergio Martínez Luna, "Tomar partido por las imágenes: visualidad, conocimiento, emancipación", in, Mayer Foulkes, Benjamín, ed*., los cuerpos de la imagen,* Ciudad de México, Editorial 17, Centro de la Imagen, 2018, p. 199.

A theory and politics of the image, therefore, would need to be on the side of the acts of seeing that dissent from the regimes of domination and expose these: "a politics of the image interrupts the logic of indifference before alterity and suffering".[846]

The image, Diéguez sustains, is at the core of ethics. A common way to see in our societies is through a type of myopic gaze. A way of looking that "avoids the confrontation with the uncomfortable, allows us to interact comfortably with difficult scenes, always remaining safe as spectators".[847] Diéguez takes the term "spectator twice over" from Susan Sontag to analyse the event and its representation as those happening *out there*, to others.[848] Diéguez specially aims at interrogating how the transgression of the *out there* to our proximity can lead to questioning if *that*—the image, work of art, or other representations—holds within it the "correct distance" to regard it. This is often, for Diéguez, employed instead of what it actually means: the comfortable distance.[849]

> In the name of an 'aesthetic correction', it has been said that showing images of violence is a way of granting victory to those who produce violence. However, I have always thought that remaining silent and silencing barbarity would precisely grant victory to the perpetrators of said barbarity, the lords of death. I propose discussing this: what does it mean to say that any such situation is 'irrepresentable'? What does it imply condemning some gesture or artwork by how they visibilise or represent catastrophic events? What does 'the correct distance' before images mean? What is set in motion when those who work with memories of pain are accused of showing 'the pain of others'? Up to what point can a distance with 'the pain of others' be maintained without contaminating our own pains? When we speak of 'the pain of others', are we not talking of what are, too, our own pains?[850]

This last sentence in Diéguez's quotation is crucial to the whole chapter and project. In a country with so many dead and disappeared, thousands of young men recruited to work for organised crime, and ten feminicides per day, how do we shudder with them without thinking of it solely as the other's pain? How do we breach the discursive articulations in which we accept being placed as apparent temporary, transitory, inert spectators of the

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[846] *Loc. Cit.*
[847] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 90.
[848] "One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker". Susan Sontag, *On Photography,* New York, Rosetta Books LLC, 2005, p. 132.
[849] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 90-91.
[850] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 87.

worst tortures a body can endure and think of how we imprint these images with something more than our mere gaze: we reconfigure them through our affects and discourses.

In the shared experience of being bombarded with countless images of violence depicting countless nameless, grave-less bodies, could we think of precisely this as an [first] experience that binds us? Iván Ruiz argues that violence is neither neutralised nor naturalised in the image but is constructed from an alternate regime of representation to that of subjective violence. He continues to state that this comes as a result of what Rancière has called "a work of fiction […] that establishes new relations between words and visible forms, the word and writing, a here and there, a then and a now".[851] In that sense, art comes again to enable this possibility.

> Certain classes of images—generally derived from the artistic sphere or associated with it—are a product of difficult-to-evade violence without this supposing their adhesion to the fearsome iconography that predominates in them. This demands, from the creative real, not precisely to objectivise violence through an exercise of distancing in which, frequently, a specific ideologisation predominates where *the others* are the guilty and murderous ones. Instead, the challenge consists of remaining in the heart of violence and, through the resources that arise from it, active a poetic and reflective procedure.[852]

As a critical *nota roja* photojournalist from Sinaloa, Fernando Brito's photographs exemplify this contemplation to stop and think beyond the discourses framed by the *nota roja.* More than evidencing the overflowing of violence into more extreme forms, such as cruelty and sadism, Brito's work makes us face an uncomfortable fact: thinking that who—what type of *othered* subjectivity—is portrayed in these images is demonstrated by their death and depiction in an image. The danger of assuming and consuming what is exposed in these images is a terror that lurks around them. A terror, as Diéguez explains, that has known how to make use of these images and has censured, erased, or invisibilised them.[853] Thus, it is up to us to confront what these images wish to reinforce: who is the evil, victimiser, culprit, the one who "must have been up to something" that the power frames to disseminate terror.[854]

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[851] Ruiz, Docufricción*, Op. Cit.*, p. 29.
[852] Iván Ruiz, "Esquelas y necrologías visuales", in Mayer Foulkes, Benjamín, *ed., los cuerpos de la imagen,* Mexico City, Editorial 17, Centro de la Imagen, 2018, p. 351.
[853] Diéguez, *Op. Cit.,* p. 103.
[854] An interesting potential future line of enquiry would be to think of these types of self-vigilance whereby a subject rejects—and the mechanisms and machinations they use—the identification with those portrayed in the image.

Your steps [were lost in the landscape][855] was not about one more death, it was about saying that these are human beings. The question of placing him on the landscape, isolating him, having no people around was meant to do that, for you to stay contemplating for a while and ask yourself what happened, who he was, and, consequently, stop judging because the problem of *nota roja* photographs and violent death is that we justify their death and criminalise whoever appears there. This is not entirely real because, here in Sinaloa, it is like a "sport" going around killing people; there are many stories about killing for the pleasure of it, only to screw someone over. [856]

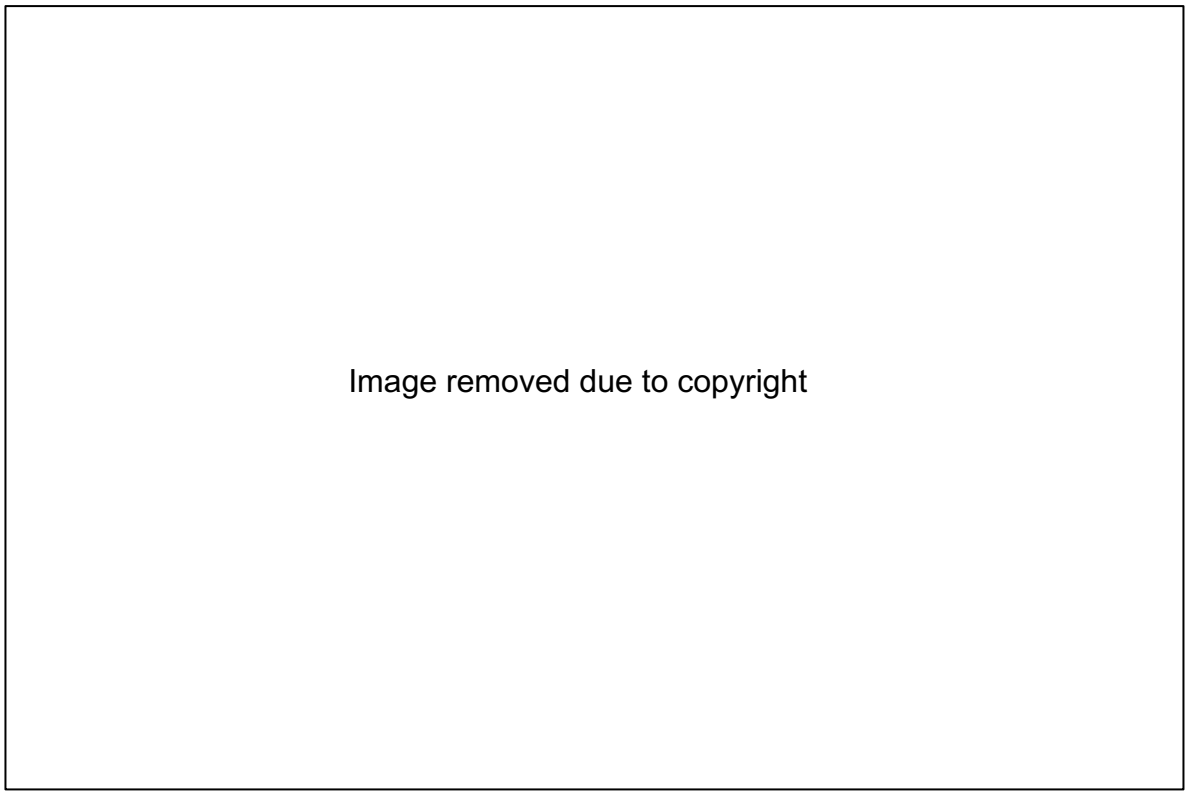

Image 1[857]

[855] This work by Fernando Brito can be found here: https://www.fernando-brito.com/proyectos/gallery.
[856] Darwin Franco Migues, "Fernando Brito 'No soy una máquina y ver el dolor me afecta'" (FROM, 11 de agosto, 2019: http://nuestraaparenterendicion.com/testigospresenciales/fernando-brito/).
[857] Image can be found in: Fernando Brito, from the series "Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje" or "Your steps were lost in the landscape" (FROM, 18 July, 2022: http://v2.zonezero.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1235&catid=2&Itemid=7&lang=es#). The image in question is number 13.

If a relentless question is how to position ourselves before something that exists and will likely continue existing—images of violence in Mexico—Brito's images suggest an answer in how they achieve a confrontation not only with what we see but how we see it. Furthermore, they dislocate our gaze, sometimes uncannily, between death and beauty. Even when Brito claims not to be trying to position his series in the art world[858] but takes these images as a concerned citizen, his work nevertheless facilitates a different appreciation of images of violence. Although Brito's images portray violence and could be the same scenes that make it to the *nota roja,* his images do not require a distancing space to think and process them. As explained in chapter two, his images *contain* that distance—between signifier and signified—enabling a different subjective positioning.

Another artistic instance addressing violent images is Alejandro Luperca Morales' "Archivo PM". Luperca collected images from the evening paper "PM" published in Ciudad Juárez and meticulously erased the bodies with a rubber eraser. The residues from this erasure metaphorically allude to the ashes. However, As Micaela Mendez notes, "beyond the obvious reference to the body's cremation, Alejandro's erasures are a critique and an aesthetic solution at the same time. The softness of the rubber, the duration of the erasing process, and its ritual connotations radically confront the immediacy and brutality of these deaths".[859] In the place of the body on the image, there is a blank space, "as if someone finally had taken the trouble of covering the body with a white sheet, a gesture that softens the collective deprivation of decency and mourning".[860]

[858] Lucía Leonor Enríquez, "Tras los pasos perdidos de Fernando Brito: imágenes para denunciar la violencia del mundo", in *Casa del Tiempo,* 51, p. 15.
[859] Micaela Mendez, "Archivo PM" (FROM, 5 July, 2022: https://proyectoidis.org/archivo-pm/).
[860] *Loc. Cit.*

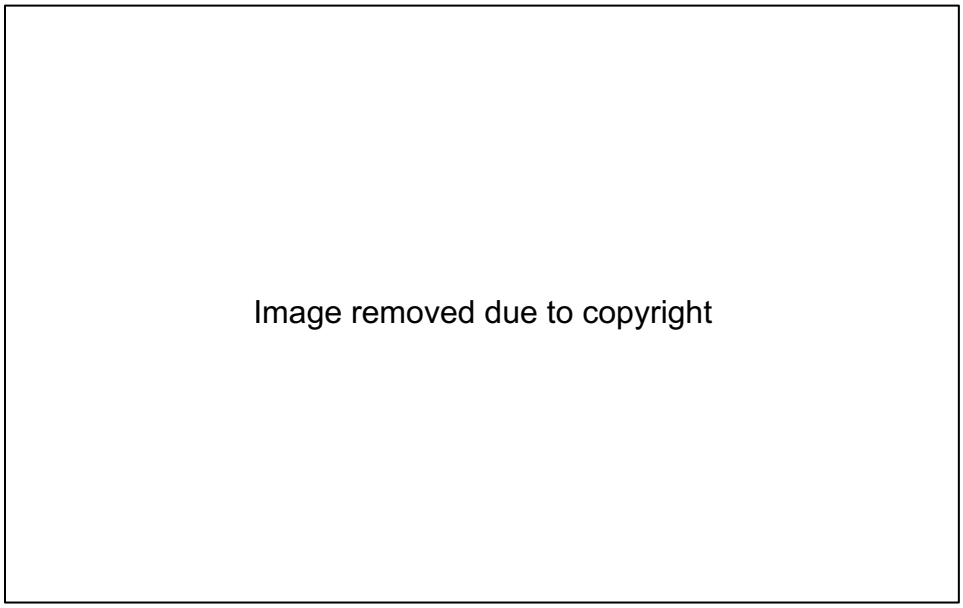

Image 2[861]

Alejandro Luperca's work incites vital reflections on photographing, distributing, seeing, and doing something with what we see. However, it is not merely a reflection: erasing gives it another conception. The bodies that are portrayed in the images shown so far are framed in a place of un-burial—neither the place of their demise nor the image's imprint serve as such. Luperca's act might cover the body, as Mendez states, but it can also be seen from an opposite perspective, as recognising in one's gaze our unseeing spots, the gaps we fill with signifiers.

The erasure and the remains of what is erased work as a powerful device. The ashes or cinders, as Derrida names "these remains without remainder", are the traces.[862] Erasing just the body shown in violent conditions whilst everything remains the same around it, but with a blank space pulling from it instead of towards it. The debris from the erasure serves metaphorically for the ashes. "No matter how much you resist it, you have mass and volume only when covered with cinders, as one covers one's head with ashes in a sign of mourning", said Derrida.[863] However, we can take the metaphor further on how we are implied in the

[861] Image from minute 4:58 can be found in Luperca's video process: Alejandro Luperca, "Ya no lo pudo lavar, 2014" (FROM, 29 July, 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeJLCJN_8xU&t=298s). Another video with Luperca's photobook can be found in: https://youtu.be/I1CAC6i2G-M?si=nhso17CH40q2XaDT.
[862] Jacques Derrida, *Cinders,* United States, The University of Nebraska Press, 1991, p. 1.
[863] *Ibid.,* p. 59.

process of erasing. We are called to witness the erasure, the blank space, the hole left by a life. We survive it.

Whether or not the subject portrayed in them find a resting place, and their living can mourn them there, in that resting place, we, as spectators, are intruding into an interstitium that consumes and re-arranges death for the living. Many authors have claimed this is a spectacle for the living. However, even when, as stated throughout, there is a characteristic of *jouissance* in seeing these deaths, and they are consumed through channels that foster capitalistic consumption, the derealisation, as Butler has named it, gives way to a groundlessness for specific lives and bodies in which claiming recognition is hampered.

> If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the "Other" means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral.[864]

Braunstein affirms that "life, defined as the set of tendencies that resist death is […] survival".[865] We all are survivors of a variety of traumas, and we carry the "scars of all those deaths through which we can be 'that'", Braunstein continues.[866] For those who have traversed events of extreme violence and horror, the traumas can be more challenging to locate but, as the psychoanalyst suggests, these dark memories serve to make "hesitant operations of security and defence" against the recurrence of trauma: "we repeat to not repeat".[867] We are, and we are not, survivors, we have survived where others have not, but to claim oneself as a survivor is of another subjective order—the same as a victim. However, we carry the scars and traces of hundreds of thousands of dead and disappeared people—we see fractions of them. Bearing that in mind when we see, remembering that the real "always returns to its place"[868] would ideally eventually enable justice, as Ana Cornide suggests: "to reclaim a visibility, restitution and justice beyond the spectral images of cadavers the communication media, as well as the human rights organisations' reports that use suffering as an instrument to facilitate an ethical response in others".[869]

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[864] Butler, Precarious life…, *Op. Cit.,* pp. 33-34.
[865] Braunstein, *Op. Cit.,* p. 196.
[866] *Loc. Cit.*
[867] *Ibid.,* p. 197.
[868] *Ibid.,* p. 194.
[869] Ana Cornide, "Tempestad: una cartografía corporal de la violencia", in *Anclajes,* 24(3), p. 30.

Conclusion

How can I give a sense of closure or conclusion to a research question that is still as pending and un(re)solved as this one? In addition to still having more questions than possible answers, the research question is pending because a critical discussion of our interaction with images of violence would require including the views of the different actors involved—those who stage the bodies as if for images, those who produce and reproduce the images, the families or loved ones of those depicted in the images, and the wider population. This lack of discussion is, perhaps, to be expected given that not only is the violence still ongoing, but the crisis of murders, executions, and forced disappearances is rising and spreading nationwide.

Thus, the need to question our interactions with violence becomes ever more pressing. Discuss what we see, hear, and believe violence to be, debate the discourses we base our perceptions and thoughts on, unlearn the myths we have created upon those discourses and signifiers, and confront what can be seen as a theatre of cruelty. It is likewise unsolved in two more ways: for one, as Derrida wrote in *The time of a thesis: punctuations,* "what is the good of going where one knows oneself to be going and where one knows that one is destined to arrive?".[870] Whilst I had—probably *strong*—ideas of what I would encounter with this project, it has surprised me in many ways. The research question always remained and remains a question insofar as questions enable thinking and certainties dilute thinking.

Secondly, and related to the first, is that whilst I have tried to understand, discuss, and analyse how images and violence, together and on their own, interact and affect subjectivity and the social bond, many unknowns remain. This goes hand in hand with the limitations of the research, in the manner in which solely humanities-based research can only address an aspect of the problem. That is, considering that this research did not include any statistical, sociological, ethnographic, medical, or forensic science, the scope of the question was limited precisely by the terms I employed, psychoanalytic ones, predominantly.

Moreover, as I have mentioned throughout the dissertation, whatever the effects on subjectivity and the social bond are, these will be appreciated in the future and looking

[870] Jacques Derrida, "The time of a thesis: punctuations", in Montefiore, Alan, ed., *Philosophy in France today,* Great Britain, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 37.

back. The task then will be to try and disaggregate and analyse in which way the visuality of violence bears responsibility for these effects. Perhaps even then, the question will remain unresolved. Nonetheless, the articulation of traces—that will undoubtedly continue for [at least] the near future—will introduce new ways of facing and explaining the problem. At the same time, it is, in a way, advantageous that the question remains unresolved, as it introduces, however minimally, the possibility of other subjective positionings and social bond articulations that could come.

Bearing the necessity and requirements to conclude research, rather than summarising the chapters, their main arguments, and an abbreviation of the content, I will, instead, develop some reflections not only on the research question but on all the variables that have arisen since its conception. I will present the traces I have witnessed and unearthed from the archival research and reflect on the thousands of images I have seen. I will situate them in today's context in Mexico and what we can expect to come. Furthermore, throughout this un-conclusion, I will try to present what has happened to me as a subject during this research.

I will start with this last point by stating my almost physical reactions and consequent resistance to seeing images of violence in Mexico. I have searched them, seen them, opened and closed them, zoomed in and out, lived with them, tried to forget them, dreamt about them, and analysed them on the couch and academically for over four years. I wish never to see one again. This, as stated in the project, will be impossible. My re-encounter with them is inevitable for a Mexican who will have roots, one way or another, in Mexico.

I have transited through horror, grief, rage, melancholy, revulsion, pain, and depression. Sometimes at the same time. At this moment, even understanding that this is the objective and a mechanism of power, I inevitably carry fear with me: for me, my family, and everyone in Mexico. The fear grows each time I visit the country. It becomes oppressive, and the paranoia that occasionally ensues can be tiring. There was also a fair dose of *jouissance,* which in my case was translated into actively looking and finding the image where my thoughts and hypothesis converged or the image that said too much and that I *must* continue seeing to write with it: hating it yet returning to it. As Valderrama puts it, "excercising or witnessing violence is a form of sonorous and silent *jouissance* in the subject".[871]

I believe the only way to approach this project was to conduct it outside Mexico. That distance was incongruous yet necessary to be able to *see,* let alone *work,* with these

[871] Valderrama, *Op. Cit.,* p. 2522.

images. Even though at some point, when in Mexico and as I mentioned in the introduction, I was able to stop and pay attention to the images of violence all around me, those that had become obscured in their overwhelming presence, only with this four-year distance have I been able to understand their deep and entrenched significance in Mexican visual culture. I have actively gone back to mnemic recollections—of a newsstand with an endless variety of newspapers or *nota roja* publications, of a vendor in the street selling newspapers, and even convenience stores with magazines—to work out all the images I have pushed to oblivion or repression, and then approached with an academic eye.

Indeed, even when doing this as a job, having to have a *sanitised*—never *objective*—view of the issue and having to turn down emotions and affects to be able to produce something, it is impossible not to be affected by them. Systematically searching for images, engaging with them, thinking about them, and placing them in drafts is not what is happening for most people living in Mexico, whom these images still confront daily and from different angles. However, something connects our experiences, namely, having to live and deal with the images in question, one way or another. Thus, I came to question whether the rational and conscientious approach is opposed to an assumed detached and thoughtless one in the face of these images' pull and overwhelming power. In other words, is an academic distance from London so radically different to an actual subjective defence against them in daily Mexican life?

As I noted in the introduction and tried to work through in the chapters, the research has many contradictions. This is why psychoanalysis is central, in so many ways, to my project. First, to recognise the contradictions we sustain in our discourses and to work through them. Second, to allow myself to see the images with free-floating attention without necessarily reading in them what I expected to find, and instead, find other layers and points of view towards them. Lastly, for the support I have found in my psychoanalytic space—and thanks to my psychoanalyst—when seeing became too much, and to process and work through them by speaking about them.

It is undeniable that violence and, more preoccupying still, cruelty represents a growing concern in the country. The hundreds of thousands of murders, over a hundred thousand forced disappearances, and ten feminicides a day are not just figures, and, in the instances when there are images, these do not represent closure for the dead. On the contrary, they are reiterating their desubjectivation, reducing them to the confines of their cruel death. Likewise, and importantly for the claim that visuality dwells not only in the visible,

even when we have no image—emblematically of the victims of forced disappearance—we fill those gaps with other images, and we can, at least, question those traces and signifieds.

Hearing our thoughts, paying attention to our habitual reactions, and pausing to construct ideas on *why* certain traces were articulated with images or words implies dwelling in what those violences are instilling in us as subjects. However, this goes in hand with the necessity for recognising that the structures that constitute subjectivities do not solely affect the subjectivities of those in direct contact with them, and with these, the need to address subjective and social implications of violence. In other words, violence and cruelty reach everyone in the country. The dissolvement or re-articulation of bonds implies us all. Cruelty is the more worrying trait, especially the sociocultural device that fosters it and of which we are part.

Whilst recognising the importance of psychoanalysis to address the broad aspects of subjectivity and the social bond and the changes it can help identify in their constitution, as well as the singular accompaniment it can represent to address subjective discomforts, psychoanalysis is not the only tool available. For one part, it is not the therapeutic tool of choice for everyone. For another, it is not feasible for the entire population to undergo a psychoanalytic accompaniment. Even for the research I engage with, psychoanalysis has limitations. Although I also focus on philosophy and visual studies and include the ideas of anthropologists and sociologists, other areas can further address the violent side of the problem of violence and visuality.

It is, however, outside the project's possibilities to explore the political, economic, social, and cultural variables that have led to the expansion of images of violence in the country. However intriguing, pressing, or even necessary to a degree, exploring an array of questions, and one that comes to mind when thinking of how images may affect subjectivity and the social bond, is the *why* of this phenomenon. This crashes against structural complexities that a single field of knowledge would find challenging to overcome. Even when asking what has led to images of violence being so present in every newsstand, television, or social media platform could aid in understanding Mexico and Mexicans today, trying to define a historical tendency that arrives at this point may obfuscate other essential questions.

This last idea is not to say that this is a futile question. On the contrary, it leads to examining and discussing a preoccupying aspect of Mexican society. However, it can quickly lead to both the dispute of an origin and to sectioned views on the matter; it can either be answered promptly or not at all. As mentioned in the introduction, this project began

with this preoccupation, incorporated it, and then strayed from it. This research does not intend to provide a comprehensive or total view of the subject. On the contrary, visual cultures and studies are a field of research and knowledge that incorporates a myriad of disciplines, theories, and approaches from social sciences and humanities.

The prominent emphasis of poststructuralism, philosophy, and visual cultures regarding violence, visuality, subject, and culture aims to encounter limitations in explaining these events and phenomena singularly and socially. In that sense, it incorporates diverse points of view. It is through these that, crossed by the language available to us to conceive and convey them, this project places a more prominent emphasis on *how* and *what* we facilitated—by convivence, repression, dismissal, disavowal, *jouissance* or enjoyment—and what has returned to coexist, affect, and haunt us. Looking towards the implications on subjectivity and the social bond of something that exists today due to varied foreseeable and unforeseeable events likewise signals the potential for transformation into different ways of being, singularly and socially.

However, an experience that can be built on for future projects is including different views and experiences of images of violence. That is, conducting interviews and including different experiences to understand their impacts on subjectivity. This could further contribute to the questions in chapter five regarding what forms of subjectivity we can witness today or are likely to witness in the future. Likewise, I did not include analyses that can ascertain the quantity and tendency in the production of images of violence. Whilst this can be interesting, it is likely impossible and potentially inconclusive.

In that sense, if new studies that included image production statistics were developed, these could be analysed to include their perspective on violence and visuality. For instance, having more precise data on how many newspapers or magazines show images of violence in a state or region could be used to compare and understand how the media reproduces events of violence. This could help examine how violent and cruel acts are being under or over-visualised and how they seek this gaze. It could help explore the *mise-en-scène* of the bodies placed as if already framed by the image. Lastly, an aspect that requires serious consideration is the circulation of violent news in social media and the trends it represents—for instance, the predominance of this phenomenon on TikTok.

Nevertheless, in this project, I am not interested in what can be measured or expected in terms of changes in variables and numbers. Working with the invisible—the unconscious, what lies unshown, the spectre—implies leaving the ground of measurability and certainty to think of a problem differently. Hence, I do not speak of potential changes to

subjectivity and the social bond in terms of quantifiable changes; as a psychic organisation, subjectivity cannot be categorised and measured. I do so in terms of the unconscious, traces, language, marks, and imprints that get articulated in ways that there are subjective changes. Particularly regarding violence and cruelty and their implications on fear, terror, *jouissance,* melancholy, and other symptoms we can witness today.

Likewise, any potential modifications to the social bond perceived today would be incomplete when solely examining what is deemed measurable. For instance, the surveys conducted in Mexico that measure the sense of insecurity—instead of fear or more complex emotions and thoughts—address the problem from the perspective of what can be seen, explained, and enunciated. Even though this project works with visible images, it also addresses what cannot be seen in them but can be experienced through them: the act, the loss, the pain, the hurt, the tears. Therein lies the predominance of language, differentiating between feeling insecure and living with terror and horror, even if these affectations of the psyche are repressed or cannot be accessible through the words we know.

Some question the production of images, others state that they want them to be shown, and others ask to be taught to see them. Whilst, as I sustain in chapter four, the incessant reproduction of images falls into the capitalist logic of overwhelming production through insatiability, consuming images of violence is still a crucial variable. As Alemán claims, the subject turns from consumer to consumed by this process and is thus necessary for the capitalist logic.[872] With these images comes a trail of horror, pain, and death drive, which are not secondary to the image consumption—although the discussion remains if by seeing the image, we are consuming others' pain as well; the pain of the involuntarily portrayed, the victims, their families, those suffering from the violence and cruelty in the country.

In the fourth chapter, I addressed how we create the visual culture where violence predominates; it is directed against us, and we direct it back, perpetuating its return and recrudescence. Undoubtedly, not seeing is not an alternative, and the arguments for judging consumption or promoting censorship lack a critical approximation. However, what is crucial is questioning ourselves, our drives and desires (or lack thereof), and, especially, why we insistently see cruel acts. This entails recognising our subjective and social responsibilities

[872] Susana Cella, "Capitalismo y psicoanálisis en la mirada de Jorge Alemán" (FROM, 8 October, 2023: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/232984-capitalismo-y-psicoanalisis-en-la-mirada-de-jorge-aleman).

in accepting and promoting a visual culture that depicts, frames, and desubjectivises the other.

Importantly, what I have tried to explore with this project is that images of violence are not merely a depiction of violence; they are within the spiral of violence. That is, they are not just symptoms; they have become indispensable for violence and cruelty to operate. They are not the paper that details the act and event; they are the scene where violences and cruelties are executed. Regarding them as simple photographs or snapshots strips them of their organising and discursive capacity. On the other hand, as with everything, we must be aware of what they are framing, showing, hiding, dissimulating, and executing. These are, if not simultaneous movements, close ones.

Neoliberalism's effort to create enjoyment—by pushing away desire—and endlessly sell things to singularise the subject whilst achieving the opposite contradicts the idea that there is a series of instructions for people to know how to see images of violence. On the contrary, as I present it here, the visuality of violence potentiated by neoliberalism thrives from giving subjects the semblance of being aware of what image and violence are whilst pushing the *real* of horror as far away from any effort of symbolisation as possible. Even though addressing how we produce and see images of violence will remain imperative in the coming years, no simple or clear-cut approach can work towards this end—in a set of words that can fit all. Any form of address will come from recognising the convoluted and complex turnings of the subject and the image.

The last point leads to the necessity for singularising images—to see the people in them as subjects and not as shadows in our wake—and the singularity of each person's subjectivity rejects the idea that one method could work for all. Whilst this could make having policies around this more difficult or limit [a particular type of] support for people who work with images of violence, binary discourses and one-size-fits-all strategies are not the answer. This, perhaps, has to do with the fact that our societies tend to address this problem from the perspective of a politics of showing rather than one of seeing. Formulating a politics of seeing would be infinitely more complex but could potentially recognise the diversity of subjective positionings, signifiers, discourses, and culture.

Two recent events happened around the time of writing this conclusion that resonate with my arguments throughout the dissertation and reinforce my commitment to ideate other ways of engaging with images of violence in common. The first event is the forced disappearance of five young men in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico. The second event was the anniversary of the 2 October 1968 massacre. The first, the disappearance of five

friends in the state of Jalisco—one of the places with the most disappearances and violences in the country—on 17 August, caused great commotion. The five friends travelled to Lagos de Moreno to the local fair, where they were abducted, and a short time after their families began looking for them, an image began circulating through social media—it was a trending topic on Twitter. In it, the young men were shown gagged and battered in an unknown location.

Many voices claimed that this image was suggestive of the hand of organised crime involved in their disappearances. Later, however, a video appeared showing two of the men on the floor, covered in blood, whilst another was being forced to kill one of his friends.[873] This event unleashed the same discussions mentioned throughout the project: speculations—of its veracity, of the modus operandi of the *narco,* of the innocence of these men—, outraged cries for the horror of living in Mexico and particularly in Jalisco, as well as racist, classist, and re-victimising interactions.

This event showed varied elements of the problem: that violence and cruelty are finding new avenues of expression through the gaze of the other—sustained in and by that gaze—, that the staging can be enacted, documented, and reproduced rapidly and efficiently and will spread like wildfire—it cannot be contained—, and that, as a power tactic, placing these images and videos on social media can be a powerful instrument for their objectives—to propagate terror and horror with extreme ease. It further exemplified the arguments made in chapter two regarding the discourses repeated *ad nauseam* on any and every violence being of the *narco*—even framing the lives of these five men within those discourses.

It showed, on the other hand, that even if these must be increasingly gruesome to do so, there are still acts that can shake society. There were voices preoccupied, first and foremost, with the lives of these young men and the cruelty they lived through. Others were more concerned with the appropriateness of being confronted with a video that was everywhere on social media—perhaps introducing the question of the algorithm and the gaze. Whether the video appeared on someone's Twitter feed, was searched for, or was automatically reproduced, it erupted into people's existence—it became a talked about event beyond social media.[874]

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[873] Beatriz Guillén, "El 'caso Lagos de Moreno': el secuestro de cinco jóvenes en Jalisco y el video que lo destrozó todo" (FROM, 25 September, 2023: https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-08-20/el-caso-lagos-de-moreno-el-secuestro-de-cinco-jovenes-en-jalisco-y-el-video-que-lo-destrozo-todo.html).
[874] In the daily press conference, the president "failed to hear" the reporters' questions regarding this event. Redacción Animal Político, "'No tengo por qué ofrecer disculpas': AMLO dice que no se burló de la desaparición de los jóvenes en Lagos de Moreno" (FROM, 25 September, 2023: https://animalpolitico.com/politica/amlo-disculpas-desaparicion-jovenes-lagos-de-moreno).

What impacts the bond impacts the subject. Hence, we are not exempt from its effects, even without looking at it. The last 17 years have seen an overwhelming production of images of violence, of which there is only a limited material option of shutting them out of sight and consciousness. Even though videos are different from images in that they involve a different logic and subjective involvement—because there is usually a possibility of pressing play or not— more images and videos will likely become more common. Consequently, the individual decision of seeing or not seeing is insufficient: we enter the unstable ground of addressing a social problem for countless subjects.

Furthermore, it is a problem with unknown subjective effects that, even considering that there are subjects accustomed to images of violence, there is no possible anticipation of how the traces of a particular image will articulate with other, unforeseen ones—such as the case of the Colombian soldier in chapter five. Mainly, we need to assume that a shift towards a visuality of violence has taken place, and trying now to guard ourselves from them can do nothing to *push against* them and the violence they are sustained in and sustain in turn.

The second event that happened whilst writing this conclusion is the 55th anniversary of the 2 October 1968 massacre. Commemorations and manifestations take place each year, especially in Mexico City. On this occasion, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), who has increasingly militarised the country[875], justified the army and their involvement in this massacre. The army, he said, were following orders. This, of course, sparked outrage—albeit not surprisingly—from many, especially those who remember and recognise the importance of this event: "2 October is not forgotten" became the phrase when referring to this day.

Even though, as stated in chapter one and the interlude, the events of the Dirty War are not strictly precursors to the war on drugs, it is nevertheless clear that a lack of remembrance and inability to mourn the othered subjectivities facilitated the recrudescence of the marginality, abjection, and criminalisation of these subjectivities. Furthermore, the lack of a serious discussion leading to unearthing the truth and fighting for justice on behalf of the State evidences the continuity of oblivion and impunity from those in power.[876] In a sense, this dissertation evidences a return of the past with these declarations: not only does

[875] Steve Fisher, "Amlo promised to take Mexico's army off the streets – but he made it more powerful" (FROM, 12 October, 2023: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/27/amlo-mexico-army-national-guard).

[876] The families of Ayotzinapa students who disappeared in 2014 claim that the president has defended the army on this event.

the violence and cruelty in the country continue—and is increasingly visualised—but we appear to be witnessing a re-articulation of discourses that work against the small achievements in terms of memory and justice of the Dirty War.

Throughout the research, I have been accompanied by the question of the necessary distance when approaching images of violence. I believed this to be crucial against the instinctual reaction to moving away from what our eyes were already looking at and moving towards *seeing* instead. I still believe this distance is crucial because consciously establishing a distance allows the space to think and the signifiers to be elaborated into other signifiers, as Montalbetti suggests. Nevertheless, I now believe that a distance is required because it implies a return; it is aporetic. It entails returning to an image, materially or through recollection, and seeing it again. The distance is seeing again, and it should recognise the traces and re-trace them—hence, the importance of including the historical aspects of Mexican visual culture from the 1960s to AMLO's discourse regarding the 2 October 1968 massacre and frame them as an issue of memory.

The work of remembrance implies confronting that distance and actively searching, analysing, and re-positioning our gaze and ourselves before violence and cruelty. Recognising that, even if we have seen this before, we can change how we see it and hopefully not see it—or hear it repeated—again. It is a fight against oblivion, necropolitics, and neoliberalism's insistence on desubjectivation. We are in different unstable ways surviving violence and cruelty in Mexico—which sets the ground for future research—so we must approach subjectivity and the social bond from the perspective of remembrance and survival.

The same can be, in a way, claimed beyond Mexico. Even though the images one can see every day on international media ensuing from different situations such as wars or immigrants suffering at sea or land differ from Mexico's images—in how they are purposefully staged and created to produce specific, contextual effects—the former likewise spread their violence and build on discourses that further marginalise or criminalise certain subjects. It is impossible to tell if images such as Mexico's will become commonplace elsewhere, particularly in the Western hemisphere, but perhaps thinking of Mexico's images of violence and cruelty can help pave the way to confront the different types of visual discourses that carry disdain, brutality, and neglect of the unmournable subjectivities everywhere in the world.

The problem of violence and the visuality of violence is not circumscribed to a particular place. If we see the bigger picture of drug trafficking, coloniality, or extractivism,

for instance, the Global North is at the core of many repercussions of violence in the Global South. In the same way, it falls not on subjects or societies of the Global South, where these images are or can be more common, to address the insistence of images of violence but on all. This is one of the reasons I decided to include specific images here, for an audience not commonly exposed to seeing them, because other iterations of these violences and images must be questioned in these latitudes.

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