

Michel Franco: Auteur of Violence

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### ABSTRACT

Michel Franco's works provide his audience with a conceptualization of modern (mostly Mexican) society through an exploration of violence and trauma as they affect the individual on both personal and public levels. Using the filmic auteur theory as my basis for an exploration of his body of work, I examine his use of spatial theory, trauma, spectatorial complicity, and neoliberalism as contributors to violence in the present day, both within a Mexican and universal context. Within his films, violence is demonstrated as resultant of his characters' environments and larger systems at work, reflected in both the spaces they inhabit and their individual self-presentations after surviving traumatic events. Ultimately, these works lead his audiences to moments of self-reflection regarding their own involvement with mediatic violence and how they assist in its perpetuation. I have taken this thesis project as an opportunity to explore each of his films as unique parts of a collective whole, in the hopes of providing a cohesive analysis of each while also demonstrating their impact as they are connected to one another thematically. Franco's ability to explore contemporary, similar themes in a multitude of forms places him in the position of a filmic auteur, one arguably enjoyed by his contemporaries but not indicative of the generation of Mexican directors who preceded him. Thus, he simultaneously ushers in a new form of contemporary Mexican cinema. Ultimately, his explorations of trauma are resultant of a discussion of mediatic violence in contemporary society.

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### GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Michel Franco presents his audience with a cohesive body of work that demonstrates a contemporary society, (mostly Mexican), characterized by violence in a multitude of forms. The issue of trauma is placed front and center as it affects his protagonists on both public and private levels, incorporated into plots as a catalyst for character development while also directing the audience towards intense moments of self-reflection as his documentary style is indicative of present day, universal themes. Ultimately, Franco uses violence to highlight the trauma caused and perpetuated by his spectators, speaking to real-life issues while also implicating the spectator as its root cause. Given that his works have enjoyed significant success in the film circuit and have yet to be explored critically, I have taken this thesis project as an opportunity to explore each of his films as unique parts of a collective whole, in the hopes of providing a cohesive analysis of each while also demonstrating their impact as they are connected to one another thematically. Franco's ability to explore contemporary, similar themes in a multitude of forms places him in the position of a filmic auteur, one arguably enjoyed by his contemporaries but not indicative of the generation of Mexican directors who preceded him. Thus, he simultaneously ushers in a new form of contemporary Mexican cinema. Ultimately, his explorations of trauma are resultant of a discussion of mediatic violence in contemporary society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
2. The Urban Jungle of Mexico City	12
3. Neoliberalism: The Creator of the Urban Jungle	30
4. From the Social to the Personal: Spaces and Trauma	51
5. Trauma, Gender Violence, and the Complicity of the Spectator	72
6. Conclusion	95
Works Cited	101

## Introduction

Award-winning director Michel Franco provides his audience with a body of work that points the spectator toward a contemporary, adult, and (mostly) Mexican society characterized by violence in many forms. Centering his films on the issue of trauma, as it impacts the individual on both personal and public levels, Franco's narratives explore the ways in which individuals – both male and female – cope with the aftermaths of violence. In a simultaneous fashion, Franco directs his audience toward moments of deep self-reflection and introspection when considering both his diegetic characters and their own involvement in the *mise en scène* of violence. Each of his films to date highlight issues of violence and its ensuing trauma at multiple levels. With this thematic interest in mind, I intend to examine his present body of work in order to position him as a filmic auteur, given that each piece functions as part of a whole. Given his status as a developing film maker, we must recognize that while he is likely to continue his exploration of violence, he may go on to broaden his focus in the future.

While Franco's films have enjoyed critical success in film festivals and juried prizes, the lack of academic interest in his oeuvre is surprising. For this reason, I find it imperative that this project take a comprehensive scope in examining each of his works thus far, in order to establish a much-needed and currently absent knowledge-basis of his filmic production. Ideally, this work will be expounded upon, as I propose that Franco will continue to be studied in the years to come, by others and myself. I see a need for an established look at and analysis of his first five films given how they have taken off since the start of his career, though most exceptionally after his second feature-length film.

Franco's *Después de Lucía*, of 2012, was selected as Mexico's entry for the Best Foreign Language Oscar at the 85<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards and won the top prize in the Un Certain Regard

category at Cannes Film Festival. *Después de Lucía* also gained significant attention at the Chicago International Film Festival, winning the Silver Hugo Special Jury Prize, as well as at the Havana Film Festival, which named Franco Best Director. The San Sebastián International Film Festival selected *Después de Lucía* for the Horizons Award, Special Mention. The film also effectively launched the career of its young star, Tessa Ía, who was nominated for a Young Artist Award in the category for Best Performance in an International Film by a Young Actress, and she has earned much recognition since. Though it does not dialogue specifically with issues concerning modern-day Mexico City (unlike the rest of his released works), Franco's 2015 film, *Chronic*, was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, eventually winning Best Screenplay, no doubt assisted by the international attention brought to him for *Después de Lucía*. *A los ojos*, (first released in Mexico in 2013, though more publically in 2016, and co-directed with his sister, Victoria), was eagerly anticipated by critics and premiered on the international circuit as well, though admittedly to much less acclaim.

In the following pages, I attempt a broad analysis of Franco's first five films, (including short film "Entre dos" and its 2016 reprise *A los ojos*), based on the themes of gender, violence, trauma, and spectatorship, in conjunction with urban studies. I argue that Franco's films play out the relationship between trauma and gender development, engaging the question of how gender types and expectations may interact with theories of trauma and recovery. Simultaneously, Franco's films establish violence in all its forms at the heart of the issues he explores. With his first work, the short film "Entre dos" made in 2003, and his later feature-length pictures *Chronic* and *A los ojos*, the slow, systemic objective violence of a neoliberal society factors in to his characters' demise(s). The thematic and aesthetic unity of these films, as evidenced by the

salience of their topics and in conjunction with the works produced in the time between them, establishes Franco as an auteur due to the deeper meaning ascribed to the pieces individually.

My primary concern is Franco's current status as a director; using Andrew Sarris's theoretical interpretation of the auteur, I intend to place Franco in line with other directors who enjoy this status in popular culture by establishing his body of work as one that is cohesive and interconnected, given that "over a group of films, [Franco] exhibit[s] certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (452). Of course, we could simply assume that Franco's successes and shared tropes are all just a fluke, and Sarris himself aptly asks: "How do you tell the genuine director from the quasichimpanzee? After a given number of films, a pattern is established" (Sarris 453). In the following pages I wish to assert Franco's importance to the film world at both national and international levels while also proving him to be the modern-day auteur of Mexican cinema that we have been missing. Of course, this is not to say that Mexico has not provided us with an astounding line of great directors, but rather that each piece of Franco's oeuvre form a cohesive part of a full body of work thus far, therein establishing the pattern that Sarris makes requisite. Not only has Franco provided us with a patterned body of work, each piece has a certain "interior meaning" (another mark of the auteur, according to Sarris), which allows it to function coherently in line with the others that precede and follow.

In my readings, I use the theoretical framework built by Cathy Caruth and Shoshanna Felman, where trauma theory is concerned, and the socio-structural theory of masculinity posed by R.W. Connell which I argue is an important measure of subjectivity in Franco's films. Regarding neoliberalism, I feel compelled to explore David Harvey's established theory on the subject, while also incorporating Slavoj Žižek's interpretations of the multiple forms of violence that permeate this body of work and provide a proper format to understand the violence sustained

at individual, institutional, and societal levels. Given that the urban space of Mexico City is such an integral part of (nearly) all of Franco's films, I endeavor as well to incorporate the works of Edward Soja, as well as current studies on the psychology of space, location, and form. I intend to incorporate cultural studies in all aspects of this project, including medical and psychological, as well as sociological studies, in order to explore the spaces with which we are presented as well as the greater societal ramifications of the violence discussed by Franco. Ultimately, Franco's work functions universally, reflecting the issues of today with a verisimilitude that is accessible to his audience.

In a separate but not disconnected trajectory to this argument, I further pose that the director's films explore the ethical relationship between the spectator, spectatorship, and the production and consumption of mediatic violence. Jennifer Barker's exploration of affect theory will assist me in this portion of the project, as oftentimes it is Franco's signature "non-sensationalistic docu-drama" style that is most striking to the audience, in lieu of the moments where subjective violence is put on display (Simon). I discuss Franco's emphasis on this modern-day violence in Mexico, and his insistence on the audience's complicity in this violence, through his exposition of universal problems that are also inherent to the particular sociocultural context as a result of a dominant hegemonic masculinity, which his films achieve by employing specific camera angles and positioning with the *mise en scène*, which encourage the participation of an active viewer rather than a passive spectator. Mabel Salinas' review of *Después de Lucía*, discussed as a "drama of venganzas," (given that the main character's father must avenge his missing daughter), also mentions that the film is a "retrato abrumadoramente duro que no permitirá al espectador permanecer impávido," and this act of revenge is derived from the same masculine hegemony that rules 2009's *Daniel y Ana* as well. As audience members that cannot

“permanecer impávido,” we come to participate and share in the mediatic violence which Franco uses his films to discuss (Salinas). While many of his films put emphasis on this ‘macho’ stereotype as the result of much of the perpetuated violence, they address the relationship between violence and trauma in divergent ways. *Daniel y Ana* discusses violence as the result of a lived traumatic experience by the title characters, while for Alejandra in *Después de Lucía*, violence against women is excusable based on a negative reaction to a female social transgression. Both conjugations of gender-violence are, however, inextricably linked to what the masculine establishes as hegemon. While *Daniel y Ana* provides us with much potential for a critical and theoretical undertaking, I find it useful to begin with the primary topic of his second work, gender violence, while viewing his other films through themes discussed in the latter, given that it was this film which earned him international acclaim. With “Entre dos,” *Chronic*, and *A los ojos*, violence in multiple forms is permissible because of the social status enjoyed by those who enact that violence. Simultaneously, we see the impact of class violence in *A los ojos* perpetuated by a neoliberal society, which results in further trauma at the expense of impoverished people because of the emphasis on wealth and subsequent lack of regard for the poor.

Each film discusses characters in the face of trauma and violence, having been thrust into life or death situations such as kidnappings or car accidents, as well as sexual trauma (the forced pornography in *Daniel y Ana* or the multiple assaults faced by Alejandra in *Después de Lucía*). These extraordinary situations are beyond the violence of everyday life experienced by Franco’s spectators, though he simultaneously heightens our awareness of how common they are. Oftentimes he highlights their loss (or the potential thereof), with an emphasis placed on their self-presentation after the initial experience. When comparing “Entre dos,” Franco’s first

publically-available work, a short film released in 2003, with his more recent feature-length films, we see a burgeoning director exploring themes which will go on to establish and inform a future, fuller body of work that explores the same concepts on more in-depth levels. A child afflicted with a (mysterious) chronic illness that can only be cured by a rapid organ transplant is lucky enough to have been sired by parents with means, and a series of contemplative scenes (on behalf of the parents) demonstrate the forces at play with which they are reckoning. After his parents decide to illegally obtain, and subsequently (quite violently) procure the organ, something only possible because of their social status and wealth, we realize that the violence at play is one of the current neoliberal society which denigrates the poor to living on the streets, ignored, and only acknowledged at the behest of the wealthy who want to, quite literally, harvest their organs. Of course, while we cannot ignore the subjective violence<sup>1</sup> that involves the actual harvesting of the organ, this work ultimately reveals the slow-burning effects of systemic violence at the societal level. Even with a short film produced years before his first feature-length project, Franco establishes his documentary-like style, using long, slow takes to build anticipation while also playing out extreme violence on camera. Though it is not the type of violence we are most presently accustomed to, given the lack of extreme action and fast-paced cinematography, the style and thematic content of Franco's first work are ones that continue to be reflected in every project since, thus immediately establishing a filmic pattern.

In *Daniel y Ana*, the two title characters are abducted on the streets of Mexico City and forced to have sex with one another; Franco bookends his film with block letters, explaining to us that this film is based in reality, and further, thousands of people in Mexico City meet the same fate each year. As each of these films take place in Mexico City, we can see that the urban

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek's interpretations of violence are multi-faceted. While subjective violence is that

space in particular is one that must be taken into consideration, given that in a way, it is depicted as the root of these issues. I will use gender studies, urban studies, and explorations of trauma and trauma theory, as well as torture, to work through Franco's focus on violence in these works. I plan to use relevant cultural studies from a variety of other fields in order to expound upon Franco's discussion of violence in this film; his oeuvre is one that shows that violence in any form engenders further violence. This first feature-length project expands those themes explored in "Entre dos" in a fashion that demonstrates the vicious cycles that permeate the lives, societies, and interpersonal relationships of his characters. Moreover, Franco's explorations of lived traumatic experiences reflect social science research in their respective fields. We come to find that his characters' reactions to traumatic experiences mirror those that are prevalent in real life, given the propensity of abuse survivors to go on to enact further violence in the future, as well as the unfortunate recidivism rates of survivors, who oftentimes continue to be victimized.

*Después de Lucía* provides a narrative concerned with the behavior of high-school-aged adolescents confronted with female transgressions of social norms. After Alejandra's mother, Lucía, dies in a car accident in Puerto Vallarta, Alejandra (portrayed by the aforementioned Ía) and her father, Roberto, move to Mexico City for a fresh start. Thus, the film's plot, and its title, "After Lucía," revolves around this female character that we never see, and a timeline that insinuates a 'Before Lucía' as well. In many of Franco's films, the evocation of this sort of timeline serves as a temporal bookmark for his audience members; oftentimes, the violence or lived traumatic experience functions as a timestamp, cutting the diegesis in half in order to juxtapose the 'before' and 'after' of the event.

Just as members of Franco's audience may at first not understand their location in this timeline, Alejandra is stuck, straddling childhood adolescence and adulthood at this moment of

change in her life. Throughout the film, we see Ale in conflicting situations; at times, she acts her age, 16 or so, like an average teenage girl. At others, she behaves maturely, as if she's the woman of the house, figuratively taking on her late mother's domestic role at home and in her emotional relationship with her father. As her roles change, her appearance becomes strikingly different as well. With this taking on and off of different roles come problems at school and with her understanding of herself. The emphasis on an individual's state as a result of lived trauma is one that Franco explores in multiple films as well. Just as certain characters are delineated by their space in the diegetic timeline of the film, their presentation of self changes depending upon their location. Their reaction to surviving traumatic events changes how they move about the diegetic space, thus demonstrating the profound effects that such violence has on the individuals' sense of self. At times, cultural norms are meant to dictate how Alejandra fulfills certain roles, but an unfortunate misstep leads to a damaged reputation and punishment for her transgression—one that is only defined by what the gendered codes of her sociocultural milieu permit.

*Chronic*, Franco's 2015 film, moves away from Mexico City but returns to the problems with a neoliberal society, while focusing on a main character who is seemingly innocuous, perhaps even helpful given his status as a professional caretaker, but in reality represents a perpetrator of slow violence<sup>2</sup>. The film's main character, David, at first seems to simply be performing his job, but we quickly realize through Franco's slow, documentary-like style that he, in fact, effectively perpetuates the illnesses of his patients by continuing to denigrate their status as invalids, not doing everything for them because his profession demands it, but rather because

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<sup>2</sup> While Rob Nixon's discussion of slow violence pertains very specifically to issues concerned with the environment, I use his term here to discuss David's perpetuation of both subjective and objective violence in a very subtle form that goes increasingly unnoticed by the families of his patients. Rather than placing an emphasis on the types of violence he perpetuates, I use the word 'slow' here in reference to his ability to enact violence while also remaining less visible.

he has a psychological need for it. In reality, David has no identity of his own, and so abuses his position in order to assign himself some sort of life's purpose, albeit in a disturbing, sociopathic manner. With this film, I intend to explore cultural studies on patient victimization and elder abuse at the hands of their caretakers, as well as the inherent susceptibility of this particular group of marginalized people given their debilitated status. I would also like to explore theories on neoliberalism and systemic violence committed by the government in an effort to understand the slow violence promulgated by people in power.

*A los ojos* is Franco's most recent film. Premiering internationally in 2016, it returns to Mexico City and focuses on a female social worker and the violence to which she resorts in order to save herself and her family. In this instance, we see a true blending of all of Franco's previously explored themes, as well as a sort of reprise to "Entre dos:" violence and trauma, the neoliberal state, and Mexico City. Co-directed with his sister, Victoria Franco, I suggest that with *A los ojos*, we come full circle, given that this film is a more recent, filled-out take on the themes which Franco explored in "Entre dos," though the family dynamic is altered in the newest work. A desperate woman who is caring for her own sick child while also assisting others in finding homes of their own and getting off drugs discovers that her son needs two optical transplants due to keratoconus. She finds new eyes for her son in those being 'squandered' by an addict that she comes across. Although she is in dire straits herself, and Franco deviates from "Entre dos" by returning to the employ of a female protagonist á la *Después de Lucía*, we see a similar power dynamic; someone in need, and of financial means greater than their victim, harvests their organs in order to protect a family member, thereby taking advantage of a permeable, societal lack of regard for people who are not similarly moneyed.

Each of these works explores themes that Franco commonly holds front and center: violence and trauma, the effects of neoliberalism, and the urban space (particularly that of Mexico City). Rather than devote several chapters to each work separately, I intend to explore these themes within their own chapters, meshing the film analysis (of multiple works), within its greater thematic context. In Chapter One, I will first establish the urban space as one that oftentimes leads to the violence discussed by Franco. This theme is particularly relevant to his first feature-length work, *Daniel y Ana*, given the title cards which bookend the piece, alerting us to the reality of the violence that has taken over Mexico City. The discussion is one that takes place in each of his works except for *Chronic*. If Franco's works on Mexico City discuss space at a 'macro' level, given that they pertain to the city at large, I posit that *Chronic* discusses the spatial aspects of the film at the 'micro' level, taking us to the private domiciles of each of David's patients, where their illness is perpetuated.

Given that Chapter One begins by focusing on broader themes before honing in on the personal, I find it fitting to use Chapter Two to discuss the neoliberal state, and how the slow violence of an individualistic government leads to the demise of multiple characters. This chapter as well has both 'macro' and 'micro' levels of the issue to discuss, given that systemic government problems serve as the 'macro,' by way of proving that there is no regard for the homeless, children on the street, or women. However, at the 'micro' level, Franco's films demonstrate that moneyed individuals also perpetrate direct violence as well. Empowered by the state, because of their wealth, it is possible for them to act as freely as they choose without fear of retribution. This problem is complicated in the films where Franco's protagonists are often wealthy themselves, though victimized all the same, such as in his first two feature-length pictures.

In Chapter Three I intend to explore violence in its many forms using Žižek's theories and Barker's comments on affect to explore the audience's complicity in each of these works. As Franco explores violence, I will prove that he also emphasizes the participation of the spectator. This mediatic discussion of violence as a force perpetuated by the audience itself is a large part of Franco's auteur status, given that each film he makes both implores us to stop what we know is happening as well as proving to us that it continues partially because we enjoy it. His signature documentary-like style is imperative here, as it allows for greater affective tension to build while also situating the viewers themselves within the diegetic space, thus forcing them to participate, thereby also encouraging, perhaps demanding, self-reflection in regards to that very participation.

In Chapter Four, I intend to explore gender violence and trauma, primarily examining *Daniel y Ana* and *Después de Lucía*, given that I find the two to be foils for one another. While the first provides us with a male victim's reaction to trauma, the second focuses on a female adolescent. In this portion of the paper I will be examining the gender expression of Alejandra through ideas posed by Judith Butler and Robert McKee Irwin. Within this broader framework, I am more interested in examining this character's development through recent sociological studies on contemporary phenomena, such as sexting among adolescents, which this film holds front and center. After Alejandra's social transgression, the group, mostly the other girls, use humor to self-affirm, while also to convince the rest of the student body to turn on Ale. With *Daniel y Ana*, such gendered trajectories are also important, given that the interrupted moment of engagement, explored by R. W. Connell, results in Daniel's further victimization of other women in his life. I intend to use social science research in the area to remark upon the verisimilitude shown here.

## Chapter 1

### The Urban Jungle of Mexico City

In order to fully contextualize Franco's body of work, we must first endeavor to understand where he situates his characters and their personal trajectories as they navigate personal traumas in a violent world. Part of being an auteur is finding "a special way of shaping time and space," and Franco's discussion of Mexico City is one that informs his audience of this "distinct vision, indeed [his] distinct worldview" (Bazin). It follows, then, that his "singular manner of putting things and people together" is one in part focused on the same locale (Bazin). Franco's oeuvre, with the exception of one film, *Chronic*, is one that explores and contextualizes modern day Mexico within an urban context, oftentimes using the space itself to inform his audience of the seemingly-universal themes which he discusses in order to simultaneously understand the current problems faced by the citizens of Mexico City. A critical study of these films would be bereft without an emphasis on setting, given that oftentimes the problems faced by Franco's characters are pertinent to, and even derived from, their situation within Mexico City. These issues include, but are not limited to, multiple forms of violence, including class and gender violence, addiction, the dominant systems of gender, and poverty. At both the 'macro' and 'micro' levels, (rather, the public and private levels), Franco's characters are subjected to the real-world problems that plague Mexico City and its inhabitants. Another facet of his documentary-like style, the portrayal of Mexico City here is one that is undeniably based in reality, and this claim is reflected by social, psychological, and anthropological research in the area. While the remainder of this thesis project will open up discussion of gender, violence, and poverty in the coming pages, this opening chapter will serve to establish the portrayal of Mexico

City within Franco's works and the greater global context, in order to afford ourselves the ability to understand another facet of Franco's auteur-ship: his commitment to realism.

Franco's focus on Mexico City is one that cannot be separated from the violence found there, and so his body of work is one that continues the legacy left behind by Mexican literature; these works "relativa[s] a la violencia urbana en América Latina se ha[n] enfocado a ubicar las relaciones existentes entre los procesos de exclusión social, pobreza, recesión económica e informalidad y de proliferación de la violencia y la inseguridad...y la cada vez más evidente incapacidad para establecer las profundas y necesarias reformas en los sistemas de procuración de justicia" (Pansters et. al. 577). Thus, his films serve to continue the exploration of Mexico's violent past that its literature tradition has already begun, focusing on themes of trauma, gender violence, and poverty. For this reason, I choose to emphasize Franco's artistic endeavors as a continuation of themes already established within Mexico's artistic literary canon. Though Franco takes part in this discussion through another, separate medium than literature proper, these films jettison from the established literary works that precede them.

Franco utilizes this conception of Mexico City as it is based in literature as well as Juan Villoro's conceptualization of the city: "La representación más común y eficaz de este territorio es la del caos" (166). We will come to find that at the 'macro' level, Mexico City is often depicted as violent, and Franco's films at a closer level explain the 'micro' violence experienced by his characters in private spaces as ultimately connected to, and stemming from, the greater violence at hand. Therefore, this chapter will first explore these films' depictions of Mexico City publically, (again at the 'macro' level), and will then delve into the private realms of the 'micro.' The second portion of this discussion (in conjunction with violence, discussed in Chapter 3) will also find space for *Chronic*. Though disconnected from Franco's typical focus on Mexico City,

this film shares quite a bit in common with the others thematically, vis-à-vis discussions of private spaces, such as the vehicle and the domicile, in relation to how they are invaded by and serve as reflections of greater violence at play. At the public level, the city-space of Mexico City conceptualizes it as a sort of urban jungle, in which these characters have little or no resources due to their marginalized (in one way or another) statuses. In the private realm, we see further complications and reflections of that socially engendered violence in the space as well.

To begin, the archeological works of Robert Preucel and Lynn Meskell can assist us in our understanding of the urban space, given that they provide us with a marked distinction between geographical land, such as plots of land in the bigger picture, or general ideas of particular cities, in comparison with those that carry a larger significance, created by the people that inhabit them: “Space is usually defined as a natural science concept, the physical setting within which everything occurs,” or that which contains people, bodies and things (215). They continue to demonstrate that “places can be regarded as the outcome of the social process of valuing space,” the products of “the imaginary, of desire, and are the primary means by which we articulate with space and transform it into a humanized landscape” (215). People of the real world, and that created by Franco within his own narratives, are the ones that give life to the spaces they inhabit, thereby converting them into ‘places.’ In so doing, they ‘humanize’ the spaces that they inhabit. In this sense, each space with which Franco provides us is actually a ‘place,’ according to Preucel and Meskell, if we are able to unpack the vast meanings that Franco and his characters assign to them.

Regarding the connection between preconceived ideas about space in conjunction with more informed narratives, Edward Soja’s work on urban studies must be given attention, as well. Soja describes different ways in which we may conceptualize human spaces, using his own

words in order to fill a linguistic void: ‘firstspace,’ ‘secondspace,’ and ‘thirdspace.’ While the first- and second- spaces refer to the plot of land and further imaginings or interpretations of that land (such as general reputation), respectively, the ‘thirdspace’ represents a “mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning” (11). We can look at the city limits of Mexico City as the ‘firstspace’ and the pre-established discussion of violence surrounding it as the ‘secondspace.’ Given the importance of emotional significance when considering a ‘thirdspace,’ which blends the first- and the second-, bringing together the established physical space with the emotions associated with it, we can look towards the views portrayed by Franco’s characters as a few examples (for instance, in *Después de Lucía* we are privy to Polanco through the eyes of adolescent Alejandra, and Mónica and Benjamin of *A los ojos* provide us with a glimpse of the streets of Mexico City). Using the language of Preucel and Meskell, thanks to the emotional weight associated with the space by the time one reaches the ‘third’ level, the ‘space’ of ‘thirdspace’ becomes a ‘place.’ So, the ‘thirdspace’ is one that includes the emotions associated with what happens inside the space itself. It can also “be described as a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world and Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality” (Soja 6). This philosophy effectively declares the significance of personal spaces, and personal views concerning places in general; basically, these spaces are important precisely because they are personal, and what happens inside of them is what assigns them emotional significance.

An important interpretation of Soja’s philosophy explains that the concept of a ‘thirdspace’ is one that is markedly more cerebral than the first and second; “Thirthing is about

finding space for an-Other form of spatial awareness (Thirdspace) beyond the concrete materiality of spatial forms...and the mental or cognitive forms of human spatiality” (Bedford 49). Thus, the ‘thirdspace’ that is associated with each place is one that also creates a certain type of alterity or otherness; the space itself carries a specific significance, an ‘other’ meaning that is a mix of both the literal and the imagined. In this way, the otherness associated with the ‘thirdspace’ is specific to the ‘thirdspace;’ it is distinct from other spaces because it carries *more* emotional and imagined significance.

Lynne Manzo provides us with a further, deeper perspective on the psychology of space, in establishing a strong connection between our emotions and the spaces that we inhabit. Her studies find that “[i]t is not simply the places themselves that are significant, but rather what can be called the ‘experience-in-place’ that creates meaning” (74). Thus, each place signifies what has happened within its borders. She continues with this train of thought, emphasizing the lived experiences of the subject: “Like Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world, experience-in-place takes as the fundamental unit of analysis both the physical location and the nature of the experience, recognizing that each is inextricably bound to the other” (74). Much of the spaces explored in Franco’s films are ‘troubled’ because they carry the emotional weight of his characters, oftentimes reflecting not just one character’s emotional turmoil, but also that of their entire family. In part, these spaces are what I call ‘troubled spaces’ because they are familial spaces.

In this more distinct summation of how we view space, I propose that we can delve even deeper by examining highly personal spaces as well, such as Franco’s exploration of the vehicle. In *Daniel y Ana*, *Después de Lucía*, and *Chronic*, for example, the characters’ unique experiences in cars leave them with varying levels of distress where the vehicles themselves are

concerned. Manzo's investigations of "experience-in-place" are inherent to our later understanding of Franco's exploration of space at the 'micro' level.

While I intend to incorporate analyses from every film into each of my chapters here, I feel that for this first chapter it is best to divide the film analysis into specific sections, so that I may simultaneously provide my readers with a clear narrative understanding of the films as well. In this manner, I intend to include a brief plot summary of each film while I analyze the representations of city and space with which Franco provides us. To begin, I will focus on the depiction of Mexico City at the public level, and will then hone in on the private realms explored by Franco. It is in the second chapter that I will also attempt an analysis of the domestic as portrayed in *Chronic*, a film clearly set in the United States, but within an unspecified city.

### ***The 'Urban Jungle' as seen in "Entre dos" and A los ojos***

Franco's first published work, his 2003 short film "Entre dos," can be considered as a prelude to his most recent feature-length film, *A los ojos*. Both depict Mexico City as a type of urban jungle, juxtaposing the haves and the have-nots through a chilling life-or-death situation. In each work, parents of a sick child are seemingly without options if an organ transplant cannot be procured. "Entre dos" features two obviously wealthy parents of a child with an unspecified chronic illness. Winner of the Premio Danzante de Oro for the 'Mejor Cortometraje' category at the Huesca International Film Festival, the short opens with a long take of medium distance on a couple in a restaurant, with the words "entre dos" appearing between the two. Told with many temporal jumps, Franco's skewing of the timeline is married to his discussion of the space, because his narrative style makes it incredibly difficult for his audience to orient themselves within the narrative itself as well as the diegetic space. Upon completion of the short film, it

becomes clear that the entire story is told in flashback, ending where it once began with the parents once again seated at the café, though throughout the piece we see them moving between meals spent at the café and time spent in the hospital with their son. At times, they invite a young homeless boy to spend time with them there, allowing him to sit at their table and buying him a meal every now and then. It is at this café where they first discover how to procure an organ transplant for their son.

It is important to note that the film starts with an emphasis on the parents as moneyed characters in the simplest sense in comparison to the street children juxtaposed outside. After nearly a minute of watching the two sit with one another at the table, a cut to their child in the hospital, under an ominous sign that says “en urgencias,” serves to explain their evident concern in the previous scene. A conversation with another woman they met previously in the hospital waiting room, who is about to lose her own son, provokes them to ask her if she would be willing to donate her son’s organs after his death, though to no avail. The male protagonist, who works at the hospital in a capacity that is unclear, speaks to another doctor who asks him if he’s considered trafficked organs, and then says: “conozco gente que te puede ayudar.” For whatever reason, the protagonist turns down his offer, making it clear that he has no interest in the black market.

This conversation takes place at work, while the two look out a large panoramic window with a view of the Mexico City skyline. This shot is indicative of their apical position within the urban jungle that Mexico City represents. These are two white men, privileged enough not only to be employed, but in the very lucrative medical profession, effectively surveying their territory as they casually discuss organ trafficking on the black market. Franco uses the *mise en scène* here to evoke the violence of the city, which is perpetuated by those in power.

The conversation briefly cuts, just as the senior doctor mentions knowing people of means, to a shot of their son in surgery as his anxious mother looks over him. On the word “ayudar,” the camera cuts from a shot of the anxious father to a shot of him seated back in the café. He is seated in front of a different picture window this time, and as he turns his head to the right, away from us, the camera refocuses on the object of his gaze: several children are playing in the street. This sound bridge provided by the senior doctor mimics the male protagonist’s train of thought, and subsequently leads us to the same conclusion. The people who can provide the male protagonist with the most help are the children in the street, the very children he has, in fact, been allowing to dine with him and his wife. A conversation he has with the younger boy that his wife first allows to join them at the table makes it clear that these children are completely unaccounted for; this boy is ten years old, hungry, and never goes to school. In other words, for an apex predator that the male protagonist represents, this little boy is the perfect prey; no one is looking after him and so will not bother to look for him if he goes missing.

This boy and those like him, are from an entirely different Mexico City than the protagonists, and it is to their distinct disadvantage, as Franco shows us. In this way, the title of the film represents not only an issue between two people, between two sets of morals, between life and death, but also one between two different worlds. The same way the panoramic view enjoyed by the doctors in the hospital separates them from Mexico City’s skyline and what happens down below, the storefront of the restaurant where the two protagonists eat is an infinitesimally small and tenuous border that separates them from their younger, poorer counterparts. While the protagonists are upwardly mobile, wealthy, and politically of means (in that they know the ‘right’ people to perform an illegal surgery on their son and his unsuspecting donor), the children of the street have no resources, supervision, or people to notice they are

missing. This dichotomy created in “Entre dos,” as well as the temporal jumps that disorient the audience, is indicative of the binaries created by Franco to come. We see such juxtapositions in *Después de Lucía* and *Daniel y Ana*, created in the form of a timeline established by Franco which dictates the characters’ trajectories based on their ability to recover after experiencing abject trauma. *A los ojos* creates a similar dichotomy as “Entre dos,” given the emphasis on Mexico City as a violent state that leaves a large portion of its population marginalized and vulnerable, at the mercy of its upwardly mobile citizens that have more resources. In this way, applying the ‘predator-prey’ relationship to the urban jungle of Mexico City is an apt description, given the dangers to which these children are subjected.

In this situation, Franco’s audience enjoys a perspective of privilege, given that we are able to cross the border established between these two worlds. We view the parents from the young boy’s point of view, and we simultaneously view him from theirs. This emphasis on spectatorial complicity is another signature of Franco’s. Just as his sound bridge during the conversation between the two plotting doctors allows us to make the jump between organ trafficking and the children of the street, this dual perspective that we enjoy affords us the illicit knowledge of what is to come. Simultaneously, it calls into question the complicity of his spectators; we watch knowing what will happen, and yet are unable to stop it. Worse, we are passively consuming the film with which Franco provides us, enjoying it even, without calling into question the common practices of violence that are placed on exhibition for entertainment. We see the same discussion of mediatic and spectatorial violence in *A los ojos*, *Daniel y Ana*, *Después de Lucía*, and *Chronic*. Although these films are concerned with the violence of Mexico City publically (with the exception of the last mentioned), Franco also calls into question the violence that permeates society, first at the macro levels, and then at the micro.

“Entre dos” continues, with the protagonists soliciting friendship of the young boy from the restaurant by offering him food and a bed to sleep in at their home. A shot of their own son’s bedroom, filled with shelves upon shelves of games and toys fit for a child his age, show that they truly are of means. They offer their new visitor some breakfast in their kitchen, which is painted all in white and extremely clean, which evokes the medical sterility of the hospital, another spatial juxtaposition which reflects their son’s illness in both settings. After breakfast, the male protagonist mentions to the boy that’d he’d like to do “unas pruebas,” of which the results are positive, in that he appears to be a ‘match’ for their son. Although Franco only depicts this on camera selectively, shots of the surgery taking place, followed by their son sitting in bed smiling and happy, clearly on the road to good health and blissfully unaware of what it took to get him there, make it clear to the audience what has happened.

This selective representation is another signature of Franco’s and will continue to be explored in his other films as well. Oftentimes, his audience is meant to interpret what has happened without a proper or direct visual depiction of these events. This adds to the ‘urban jungle’ image of Mexico City with which he provides his spectators. Frequently, the two ‘worlds,’ or variations of Mexico City are unrelated from one another, in that most of its citizens seem to move laterally. From a determinist perspective, the children of the street that the protagonists take advantage of have no real opportunity to avoid their miserable fates. Part of the urban jungle in which they live is the lack of upward mobility that they have. The protagonists come from a higher social class and therefore have more opportunity. This is clear from the diegesis itself; their son is dying and they are unable to cure him without procuring a transplant. They’ve exhausted their options in trying to find one the ‘right’ way, having asked multiple people to list their own dying children as organ donors. However, because of their social

position, the father's occupation, who they know (the doctors willing to perform an illegal surgery), and their proximity to children who are not being cared for (purely by chance, based on their choice of restaurant), they are able to make possible what was once impossible, and thereby cheat death, in a way.

One of the film's final shots focuses on a car that has been put in reverse, backed up to a huge ditch, part of a waste facility, from medium distance, and shot from an upward angle. The audience is inside the ditch, anticipating what will happen next. Two faceless men open the trunk, pull out what appears to be a roll of blankets fastened together, and toss it into the ditch, letting it roll downhill as the camera fades to black. The camera cuts immediately to the son smiling in the hospital. The innocent child whose organs have allowed theirs to live has been reduced to a body wrapped in blankets, the same fate met by Mexico's numerous cartel victims, and thrown away at the local dump. The film returns to the parents back at the café, with the father shot from behind his right shoulder this time (mirroring the perspective from which we've seen him in the past).<sup>3</sup> This reversal effectively and visually represents what has shifted within the narrative.

With "Entre dos" Franco explores the duality of Mexico City, representing the spaces inhabited by the protagonists as different from those of the children on the street. In moving from his normal haunts to exploring the street where the children reside, the father crosses into a world different than his own. His crime results in his occupancy of two ethical spaces as well: the positions of 'right' and 'wrong,' or 'good' and 'evil.' His son will live, but only because he has

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<sup>3</sup> These mirroring shots are another trope of Franco's; in both *Daniel y Ana* and *Después de Lucía*, we see shots taken from the beginning and endings of the films that are reflections of one another, which further expound upon the dichotomies that he creates. The cinematic form of his films thus reflects the narrative in a literal, tactile way, representing visually that which has experienced a diegetic shift.

killed an innocent child. The camera focuses first on his point of view, observing the victim's companions enjoying themselves outside, his recent disappearance and death unbeknownst to them. The film then cuts, and a close-up of the male protagonist shows his face, as well as the children's reflection in the window to the left of him. Finally, the camera moves forward for another close-up, fully focused on the male protagonist and the harrowing look in his eyes. No matter the consequences, Franco's cinematography make it clear that ultimately he will have to live with what he has done. Although they are not considered of import to most citizens in Mexico City, the reflection of these children juxtaposed with his image represent the wrongdoings he has committed, as well as his guilt.

*A los ojos*, Franco's most recent feature-length film and also set in Mexico City, revisits the organ trafficking theme, as well as the depiction of the urban jungle. The film follows Mónica, a social services worker and single mother, as she navigates the city checking in on her clients and does her best to care for son, Omar. Already providing us with a dismal but realistic look of Mexico City's addicted and homeless living on the street, Franco's narrative takes a startling turn when we learn that Omar has keratoconus in both eyes, a degenerative condition that leads to the removal of the cornea. The film then becomes a harrowing life and death narrative as Mónica searches for a way of curing her son, with the only option being two expensive transplants that have incredibly long waiting lists. Luckily for Mónica, the streets of Mexico City provide her with more options than the hospital, and Franco's film follows his previously established narrative in "Entre dos," with his protagonist having to result in capitalizing on the city's poor infrastructure and disadvantaged population.

The film opens with Mónica making home visits as a social worker, having a conversation with a family who lives on the street. A cut to a new conversation on a different

street, with a client named Ángeles, results in Mónica asking several probing questions about their job, diet, and drug use. The way this particular client makes money is by collecting and “contando botellas” on the street. All shot from a medium distance, Franco uses the sounds of the city and the streets as an auditory code. We almost never have a break from the hustle and bustle, converting the city into a sort of character while it simultaneously functions as an obstacle to the people within it. Much of the film demonstrates the sounds of the city, oftentimes emphasized through the editing, so as the sounds of the streets are unavoidable. This allows us to hear the city as Mónica and her clients do, though admittedly she gets to go home to her apartment and her son every night, while they must endure it while attempting to sleep in the street.

Throughout the film, Franco uses both this auditory code in combination with sound bridges, as well as a striking use of special cuts in order to highlight this juxtaposition between Mónica’s lifestyle and those of her clients. While she visits her clients, Franco cuts to a little boy sleeping on the couch with his face hidden from us. We later find that he is her son, Omar, and he was sent home early from school after falling prey to school bullies. The fight seems to have damaged one of his already-diseased eyes. Later on in the film, shots of the two spending time at home are interspersed with cuts to the lives of the street dwellers, particularly of one adolescent named Benjamín, who luckily has a bit of space to sleep on the floor upstairs in Mónica’s building. Oftentimes, the film cuts back to Benjamín, in between more shots of adolescents playing games in the street and depictions of Mónica’s home. Thus, Franco’s editing techniques highlight the inequality in Mexico City, as well as the sheer number of homeless and addicted youth. These juxtapositions in the form of cuts between richer and poorer characters increase the divide between them, further positioning those with less power as weaker, more vulnerable, and clearly living at the mercy of Mexico City’s wealthier set.

Franco briefly touches upon the rampant drug use in Mexico City as well; Benjamín admits to first beginning to smoke marijuana at the age of six, and it has since become a necessity for him, as it is the only way to spur his appetite. Ángeles mentions a dependency on drugs and alcohol as well. These brief glimpses at the life of Mexico City's addicts give further credence to Franco's documentary-like style, demonstrating visually that "[o]ver the last decade, Mexico has transitioned from being mostly a drug transit country to now also being a user country" (García 457). The issue became so dire that in 2003, the public health program that included substance abuse treatment, Seguro Popular, was established (457). One long take focuses on Benjamín sitting on the roof smoking a cigarette; after he gets up to leave, Franco keeps the camera still, requiring his audience to observe the space where these adolescents spend their time. The entire frame is filled with grey bits of debris, cement or some sort of building material, and the floor is littered with trash. Other people's belongings (identical to trash) strewn about make it clear that this space is occupied by people who actually live here, as well. Another shot of Benjamín's long process of climbing down from this ledge further emphasizes the image of the urban jungle; the way he navigates the city is animalistic, and his only vantage points are in places that most citizens would not consider worthy of occupation.

Although Mónica herself does not appear to be wealthy, necessarily, (she walks everywhere or uses public transportation, she worries about covering her son's medical bills), she clearly occupies a social position a few rungs above the people with whom Franco juxtaposes her. Some of these adolescents are constantly entering, leaving, and re-entering the *anexos*, (drug rehabilitation centers that ironically resort to violent punishments in order to assist

their patients' recovery), and sleeping on the street (García 456).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in his room above Mónica's apartment with a roof over his head and a few blankets, Benjamín occupies an even more tenuous space, because he is situated between these two worlds (first introduced in "Entre dos"). Mónica brings him food and provides him with a place to sleep, which indicates that he receives more attention from her than the others for one reason or another. However, Franco's narrative demonstrates that what are seemingly his advantages are actually his downfall. The extra attention received from Mónica is what leads to his victimization.

Another cut brings us back to Mónica as she traverses the city. Shot from above, the camera comes to focus on a giant crosswalk; right now, we are in a different part of the city, where there is more money, and more 'civilization' given the much larger amount of people that reside here. The crosswalk takes up the width of the street, and people walk by from each direction, and amongst the rain, noise, and crowds, Mónica makes her way with determination. Though at first it would seem that this shot would leave her lost in the shuffle, what it really

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the addicts who attempt to recover in the *anexos* are colloquially referred to as *anexados* (García 455). This linguistically separates people who are already marginalized. They are referred to by name as what society has done to them; they are so called because they have been 'annexed' by society. Oftentimes, torture and violence are used as a means to recuperate the *anexados*, who recognize that they live in fear, but also that they desperately need help and will do anything for it. In one study, an 18-year-old addicted to crack cocaine observed, "Yes, I miss my freedom. But there are more people outside who want to kill me than protect me. Hopefully they'll forget about me before I return." Although Franco only briefly touches on these rehabilitation centers in his film, they further establish the violence that these characters, (and the actual people off of whom they are based), face daily. Those who work in the *anexos*, oftentimes recovering addicts themselves, are referred to as *padrinos*. One perfectly summed up life in Mexico City as an addict, while simultaneously defending their violent methods (which he vehemently declared as effective), by saying: "So am I going to live or die today, or what?" (467). Further, the addicts' families also see their daily lives as a life-or-death situation, recognizing that they "turn to *anexos* without reference to rights, but with the compelling claim that there is no other option but abandonment or death." (464). Ironically, this situation is entirely comparable to Mónica's, in that her son will lose quality of life without her help. However, she is clearly of economic and social advantage in comparison to Benjamín and the rest of her clients. The study concludes that "violence is integral to everyday life in Mexico," a point very clearly established by Franco with this film and his previous short (468).

shows is Mónica's adeptness at traversing the urban jungle; she weaves her way through the crowd, using an umbrella to keep her dry. A cut to Benjamín begging in the street with friends, while hiding under an awning, demonstrates that they cannot afford such luxuries. Another cut brings us back to Mónica while riding the bus, at one point shot from the front, appearing exhausted, with the auditory code inundating the audience with sounds of the city. Although in some ways the city serves as an obstacle to these characters, at every turn Franco's cinematography points to Mónica's savvy as she navigates it.

At a loss for how to help her son, a burgeoning relationship with Benjamín spurs Mónica to take action. As the narrative progresses, it seems as if the city is closing in on her; the walls begin to frame her more closely as she makes her home visits, as if she is constantly encapsulated. Dimly lit halls depict her as lurking in the shadows. At one point, perhaps while searching for Benjamín, we watch her scale the same wall to the roof as he did; thus, although Mónica is a character of means, she also occupies the same liminal space that he does, because she is evidently able to navigate the city as well as the rougher parts that he knows all too well. Again, this depiction of Mónica as predatory perfectly foreshadows what is to come; a cut to a medium take in front of her building reveals a collapsed figure lying at the foot of the steps. It is Benjamín. He must be carried in, and as she picks him up to lift him to his feet, a match-on-action cuts to the inside of the dark corridor, backlit by the window in the door, to Mónica effectively dragging her prey through the shadows. The lighting makes for an ominous scene as Benjamín is manipulated by Mónica and carried up to her apartment, completely vulnerable and at her mercy. Franco's cinematography here reinforces Mexico City as the urban jungle while simultaneously calling into question the supposed goodwill of its more moneyed citizens whose dubious ethical standards result in the deaths of so many marginalized people. Though Mónica

does not come from the same means as the parents of “Entre dos,” she has notably more privilege than Benjamín or the rest of her clients, and this does give her distinct advantages.

A cut to a home visit from the doctor, and then to the surgical room in the hospital, and back to his hovel, shows Benjamín groggy and disoriented, asking Mónica, “¿Qué hicieron?” All he is told is that he had an infection with his eye, and he is lead to believe that in time, he will be able to see again (really, his cornea was removed and given to Omar). What follows is a sick convergence of Benjamín into Mónica’s surrogate son, of sorts. Without enough clothes, food, shelter, and now an eye, he is completely dependent on the person who harmed him to ensure his survival in this period of recovery. She feeds him breakfast and allows him to spend more time in her apartment. When we do see him navigating the stairwells to get back to his own room, the shots take place in dark hallways, framed by different walls and corridors, lit only from distant windows, evocative of a labyrinth. Thus, Benjamín is still responsible for navigating the urban jungle that did him grave harm, and now he has been maimed, forced to wear an eye patch and unable to ever recover. In another ironic twist, Benjamín informs Omar that his eye became injured in a fight, and the fight is referenced again by the doctor who comes to perform another home check-up. Recalling that Omar first injured his eye after getting picked on at school, Franco provides another perverse insinuation that Benjamín is forced to perform the role of Mónica’s son, although in this case he was only ‘adopted’ in order to ensure that her other son would live. In this way, the only ‘service’ Benjamín can offer her, (and it is clear that Mónica is only spending so much time with him because he serves a utilitarian purpose for her), is as an organ donor for her younger son. This emphasis on the individual’s ‘value’ will be further explored in my chapter on neoliberalism, though it is also pertinent here. In a society where one’s survival is not promised in the day-to-day, a city ridden with violence leads to individuals

with seemingly no other options taking advantage of one another in order to get ahead, consequences be damned.

Recognizing that Omar ‘needs’ two corneas, a conversation between Mónica and the doctor in the hospital leaves her hesitant and in tears, though he reminds her that “Omar es muy importante,” and “Sabemos qué se iba hacer.” Without confirming or denying the results of the conversation, Franco cuts the scene and transitions to Mónica’s kitchen, where she sends Benjamín off for groceries. Another cut brings us back to the surgical room, with the two boys unconscious on gurneys. Omar has another eye exam and we see him driven home, arriving at his apartment building. He is escorted by his mother upstairs, with the same shot in the same dark hallway, reflective of the previous instance where she lead an unknowing Benjamín up the same flight of stairs to meet his fate. This final shot of the pair reminds the audience of Mónica’s predatory tendencies and Omar’s subservience to her. Another cut brings us to a city dump, and pans over heaps and heaps of debris. A young homeless person, disoriented and clearly struggling to keep the sun out of his eyes (the cornea is what regulates how we process light) can be seen lying helplessly amidst the trash. It is unclear whether he is alive or dead as flies buzz around him. This shot is an even more graphic representation of Franco’s ending to “Entre dos,” because we see the body of the character with whom we have grown to identify. This is the Mexico City that Franco depicts: predatory, violent, an urban jungle.

## Chapter 2

### Neoliberalism: Creator of the Urban Jungle

Moving on from Franco's study of Mexico City as an inherently violent place, we come to understand why through his mediated discussions of neoliberalism. In short, the neoliberal state of governance in Mexico City permeates city life, and thus explains the poverty and life-or-death struggles faced daily by many of its inhabitants. While all of his films set in Mexico City examine the haves and have-nots, it is through "Entre dos" and *A los ojos* that we see these issues of class struggles highlighted most strongly, though the violence featured in *Después de Lucía* and *Daniel y Ana* demonstrably reach his characters of means as well. While my previous chapter focused on Mexico City as a place of established violence, in this second chapter I endeavor to view its positioning in Franco's films as a place rooted in violence due to it being a place that "today remains enthralled with –and impaled upon—these ultra laissez-faire precepts" (Cypher et. al. viii). David Harvey's understandings of neoliberalism and its effects, as well as Zygmunt Bauman's studies of the commodification of the body and the age of consumption, will aid me in my analysis and interpretation. I will primarily focus on Franco's short film "Entre dos," and its reprise with *A los ojos*, as it is these works which explain the detrimental forces under which Mexico City's poor are subjugated, while the violence in *Después de Lucía* must also be revisited given Franco's depiction of the privilege with which more moneyed students are afforded, though they are simultaneously subjected to reigning hegemonies established by such policies. In this fashion, *Después de Lucía* thus also provides insights into the behaviors of Mexico City's wealthier population, demonstrating how the individualistic attitudes that go hand-in-hand with neoliberalism affect the more privileged set.

David Harvey's understanding of neoliberalism is one that is predicated upon the state's involvement in the free markets, and how this economic attitude went on to permeate the daily lives of its citizens. He first briefly defines neoliberalism:

State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit. (2)

Thus, neoliberalism begins as an economic understanding that championed minimal government involvement in order to allow the market to play itself out. However, with this in mind, "neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse," which has "pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey 3). It is this permeation of neoliberal attitudes that Franco emphasizes in his films, given his discussion of characters in Mexico City from all social levels. It is also important to note that neoliberalism can now be equated to a "political commitment to ideals of individual freedom" (Harvey 21). Thus, Harvey's work demonstrates how such political attitudes can in turn develop into a general 'life philosophy' of sorts, allowing those living beneath it to justify their actions with ease, given that in every somewhat questionable situation they can simply claim pursuit of personal liberties. In each of the films I intend to analyze in this chapter, the courses of characters' lives are changed drastically, in part due to demonstrably neoliberal attitudes reflected in their worldviews.

This interpretation of neoliberalism from simply an economic standpoint to an omnipresent philosophy that has viciously spread entails "'creative destruction,' not only of prior

institutional frameworks and powers...but also of divisions of labor, social relations, welfare provisions...ways of life and thought,” which Franco places front and center in “Entre dos” and *A los ojos*, given the incredibly individualistic attitudes of his characters as they willfully kill children in order to save their own (3).<sup>5</sup> Harvey notes that “[t]he assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking,” and this individualism is rampant in Franco’s films, oftentimes justifying his characters’ transgressions as they navigate dire situations (7). The only differences we see between those who can ‘afford’ the transplants in one way or another is money, or rather, social class.

Mónica of *A los ojos* admits that she cannot afford her son’s surgery and is not well-insured, though her social connections with her son’s surgeon, as well as her status as a social services worker, afford her proximity to those who can help her in a multitude of ways, while the victimized Benjamín’s only social connection to someone above his station in life is Mónica herself, who by her own profession is meant to help, rather than to harm, him. It is this “hegemonic...mode of discourse” at play, according to Harvey, which leads to such behaviors in a society where every member is forced to privilege themselves over their compatriots (3). Harvey also notes that we can “interpret neoliberalization...as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (21). Though Mónica is not an ‘economic elite’ by any stretch of the imagination, when positioned next to Benjamín, her economic advantage results in the rescuing of her son, Omar, and Benjamín’s blindness, and potentially his death.

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<sup>5</sup> *Después de Lucía* provides us with the point of view of the wealthy, demonstrating how such power affects their behavior at school, work, and in their daily lives. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

Franco employs certain tropes with the *mise en scène* in order to highlight his character's wealth. After Omar's surgery at the end of the film, Mónica drives him home in a car, which we can only presume to be her own vehicle as they are unaccompanied and it is not a taxicab. Up until this point in the film, we have only seen her traverse the city on foot. However, to discover she has a car is to discover that in the end, she has far more than Benjamín, though admittedly she leads a frugal existence. Daniel Miller's studies on car culture further highlight the power such opportunity brings, noting that the car is also "a vehicle for class, oppression, racism, and violence, all evident products of our humanity" (2). While recognizing that the space of the car is associated with much more in *Daniel y Ana* and *Después de Lucía* on top of the mediatic violence that it brings, it also affords the wealthy the opportunity to carry out violence in both of these films, assisting in multiple kidnappings and the disposal of their victims' remains. The relation between power, money, and violence is explored even more deeply in the second film, given the female protagonist's disappearance after experiencing severe bullying at school. A gentle round of police questioning isn't enough to assist in finding her because those being questioned are Polanco's wealthiest students.

The wealthy parents of "Entre dos," one of whom works in the medical profession, are able to murder, and subsequently get away with murdering, a child because of their wealth. Thus, as Harvey has stated and Franco's films support, neoliberalism serves to reward the wealthy and denigrate the poor, who go unnoticed and uncared for, living invisibly on the streets of Mexico City. The means by which they are able to procure the organ(s) and subsequent surgery are pivotal at this point, because without their social status and wealth, it would have been impossible. To their credit, Franco demonstrates that this couple go to other lengths before the

illegal harvesting (methods which we do not see Mónica attempt to employ in *A los ojos*), wherein we see the couple speak to a few other parents of sick children in search for a donor.

We discover that the “niño en urgencias,” whose mother the protagonists pleaded with for a donation, “puede pasar en cualquier momento.” However, the mother of the sick boy, understandably unable to come to terms with his condition, refuses, not willing to listen to another word as she gets up and walks away. Franco then turns the camera to her, and we watch her storm off down the hall as the image blurs and a sound bridge (her heels clack loudly on the hospital floor) bring us back to the mother as she gazes out of the window in despair. It is important to note the positioning here. As he does in other pivotal moments of his films, this shot mirrors that of the conversation that will later be held between the father and his superior. The mother stands to the left of the screen in a medium take, and city skyscrapers are visible. It is as if she knows that the solution can only be found outside of the hospital, in the urban jungle itself. This shot foreshadows both the conversation and the violence to come, given that the mother’s gaze acts as a premonition, correctly predicting that the donor will be found outside of the hospital, borne of the city’s streets, unable to defend himself against the predators represented by the protagonists. The next conversation happens in the home of another sick child’s parents, where the couple speaks with his mother. The use of intercutting brings us back to the female protagonist’s gaze to the city, further indicating that the solution will be found elsewhere. This second mother refuses them as well, mentioning that her husband “no tiene paciencia,” effectively ushering them out after repeating “[d]e verdad no podemos ayudarles.”

The scene then cuts, and we see the couple lying awake in bed from a bird’s eye view, literally kept up at night by the trauma which they are imminently about to face (the loss of their child). The image then blends, evoking the passing of time once again, as the mother turns over.

A fade to black brings us to the restaurant once again, where they first encounter the unnamed boy who will later involuntarily serve as their own child's organ donor. As he approaches asking for spare change, the mother moves over and allows him to sit, asking him a series of questions such as "¿Cómo te llamas?," "¿Vas a la escuela?." (to which the answer is a resounding 'no'), "¿Cuántos años tienes?" and finally she commands him: "lávate las manos." This questioning at first seems motherly, though at the same time highlights her class privilege and the boy's lack thereof. The implication that he must be in school, when an entire population of Mexico City's youth are not served by it, given the lack of care afforded them, is insensitive when considering his painfully obvious living situation, given that they met after he approached them asking for "un peso." The condition that he must wash his hands before he eats also seems motherly at first, but evokes all sorts of class connotations between a wealthy white woman and a young boy living on the street. Even while genuinely attempting to do him a kindness (at this point in the film), he is evidently seen as 'less than,' and even dirty. He gets up to wash his hands, and another sound bridge brings us from the cut of the black screen to the conversation between the male protagonist and his boss.

This multitude of scene cuts functions to propel the narrative and simultaneously evokes the protagonists' social mobility (vertically), in that they are constantly shown moving from location to location, (luxurious ones, at that), effectively mimicking their ability to traverse the city quickly, as they please, without the assistance of others. We do not see the same types of transition shots of the street children, or the young victim specifically, because this mobility is not afforded to them. Rather, these children of the street oftentimes simply fade in or out of view, seen through the eyes of the male protagonist. In turn, the way Franco allows these children to appear and disappear effectively demonstrates both the way they are viewed by society, and

simultaneously the way they succumb to violence in the city. To my first point, neoliberal attitudes allow the upper class to participate in willful ignorance, choosing simply not to see what is directly in front of them: a population in need. In this instance, the children only come into our focus after the male protagonist conjures, and then puts into action, his sinister plan. Their fading in and out is evocative of exactly what eventually happens to them upon their actual, real-life disappearances. We don't see them leave directly because we never directly saw them in the first place. Ironically in *A los ojos*, Franco uses an illness that leads to blindness in Omar to comment on the society's metaphorical blindness to issues of poverty. Benjamín's eyes are harvested by those in greater power than he is, though in blinding him they do not consider the root of the problems which they have the resources to fix.

After the sound bridge in the café, heard following the mother's request that their guest wash his hands, we return to the hospital. Finally, the husband (and father) speaks to his superior as they gaze out of the window, Mexico City's skyline in resplendent view. His boss asks him if he has considered organs from the black market, (“¿Has pensado en tráfico?”), thus reminding us that what we see happen at the end of this film is actually an omnipresent violence resulting in the deaths of a multitude of innocents, though we have only come to know this young boy. The positioning of this conversation in front of Mexico City's skyline alludes to the rampant violence happening in the inner city daily. When the father refuses organs from (unknowing) donors with whom he is not familiar, his superior says “Conozco gente que te puede ayudar.”

We must bear in mind that to know someone who knows someone is to wield social power, and this social power is only available to those with money or status (typically determined by personal wealth). Not only do these parents need the cash to pay for the surgery, as well as whatever the surgeons acting illegally elect to charge, they also are of means in that

they have the personal contacts capable of acting in their favor. Had their victim been afforded the option socially of some sort of advocate, his life could be saved. However, as Harvey's connection between neoliberal practices and individualistic attitudes demonstrates, he lives at the mercy of those in social power. "Entre dos" effectively proves that much more comes along with personal wealth than just money; the male protagonist has status, a job that is well-respected by those in his community, access to everything one might need to perform a surgery, all things that are associated with import, as well as qualities which will immediately separate him from such a violent crime as kidnapping, and thus potentially save him from punishment should anyone discover that this involuntary donor is gone. In comparison, as a child of the street his victim will likely not be reported as missing for quite some time, making his job all the easier.

Moreover, urban studies of Mexico City carried out by Anne Becker and Markus-Michael Müller pinpoint the space as a bastion of neoliberal attitudes, and speak of urban spaces generally as "crucial for the emergence, consolidation, and reproduction of neoliberalism" (77). Thus, Cypher and Wise's assertion that Mexico "remains...impaled upon" these neoliberal themes is not hyperbolic, given Becker and Müller's claims that cities in general become breeding grounds for such policies to take hold (viii). The economic diversity found in urban spaces, especially one that has sprawled to the extent which Mexico City has, leads to the wealthier set looking for ways to protect what they have, while simultaneously driving out the poor "for the sake of good credit ratings and urban competitiveness" (Becker et. al. 81). Not only are the poor already destitute, disadvantaged from the beginning, but the prevailing individualistic attitudes associated with neoliberal economic policies lead to the poor then being treated even worse, spurned through gentrification and other practices in what amount to beautification efforts, with the intention of then making their neighborhoods even more

exclusive, and therefore more lucrative. This leads to attempted total re-hauls of the cities: “[T]he neoliberal state has been increasingly involved in the implementation of urban spaces designed to guarantee the... securitization of urban space, conceived as the hegemony of security and (dis)order concerns of regarding the ‘proper’ use, design, and (re)ordering of urban space” (Becker et. al. 78). The aforementioned “securitization of space” results in the poor with nowhere to go, perceived to be the ‘dangers’ which plague the city, but in reality they are struggling daily to keep their homes.

Zygmunt Bauman’s theories of consumption and work ethic also prove very useful here, given that they provide a bridge between neoliberalism, individualism, and the ways in which such policies become practice, which results in changing prevailing attitudes about one’s fellow citizens. Bauman’s work explores a society predicated on work ethic, which he defines as the notion that one “should go on working even if [they] do not see what that could bring [them] which [they] do not have already or don’t think [they] need,” going on to affirm that “to work is good, not to work is evil” (5). Thus, the work ethic is innately tied to consumerism in that those who no longer need to work, recognizing that they have everything they want, are spurned, because work could also bring to them things they do not yet think they need, or do not know they want. To be not working is “to be satisfied with what one has already got and so to settle for less rather than more” (5). Bauman’s discussions of the work ethic as the essential ‘worth’ of every living member of society point towards what each member must be doing ‘for’ others, as well as the idea that constant consumption is the normal state of things. To be satisfied with what one has is essentially to have given up, preferring to devote oneself to a lifestyle of perceived laziness rather than a quantifiable value determined by those for whom one works.

This consumption, the recognition that “[o]urs is a consumer society,” and the notion that we must continue working regardless of our success, what we want, and what we already have, is inherent to modern societies in that members are lauded for what they produce (Bauman 23). Mónica’s actions in *A los ojos* are justifiable, in part, because she is struggling daily, striving for more, working towards something, while Benjamín arguably just ‘takes,’ without providing anything in a society that has left him derelict. Thus, as a perceivably ‘unproductive’ member of society, he loses his sight for Omar, someone who could go on to be a more ‘productive’ member of society. This notion coincides with Bauman’s “tacit presumption” that work is equivalent to duty, the spoils of which belong solely to the earner. Ironically, those who do not work are put down for not contributing, but those who do keep track of what they have do so in very miserly ways, all the while looking for more and more to consume, steadfastly refusing to give it up; this also strongly connects back to individualistic attitudes, though in an admittedly confused way, given that the poor, like Benjamín, are considered to be a drain on society. He is scorned for not contributing to the hegemonic system created by the rich in order to allow them to become richer, while they simultaneously refuse to care for him, or those like him, though they are clearly of means.

Bauman continues in his discussion of the “tacit presumption” that work is duty, mentioning that “[m]ost people fulfill their duty and it would be unfair to ask them to share their benefits of profits with others, who could also fulfill their duties but for one reason or another fail to do so” (5). Thus, Benjamín does not deserve protection by the state or even by Mónica, (though we must not forget her very line of work was established by people who want those like him to be cared for), because he has “fail[ed]” in his duty, and simultaneously implies that Omar

is more worthy because he is of a higher social class.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis here is on failure. In each of these films, Franco highlights the children living on the street; in fact, his plots would not be able to move forward without them, and thus they drive the narrative, providing spare organs for his moneyed protagonists who privilege the lives of their own children over others. These children living in the street are not thought of as having been failed by a system, (or multiple systems), but rather as failing members of society, who in turn are products of other already-failed members of society. At some point, their youth is no longer an excuse, and they are expected to produce, in the name of contribution and doing their ‘duty.’ For the unnamed little boy in “Entre dos,” this expectation starts as young as ten years old.<sup>7</sup>

At one point in *A los ojos*, Omar and Benjamín attempt to rescue a stray cat, after becoming better friends. Mónica does not allow them to keep it, and so they take to the streets one day in search for it. Once they finally come home, Mónica subjects her son to a very classed line of questioning, saying things like, “¿Te gusta la calle?” and “¿Subiste el metro? ¿El camión,?” in order to determine which parts of the city he has visited. Her plan to ‘raise’ another boy that will serve as his organ donor has backfired, in that now her son has started to take after

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, however, Omar’s background as the child of a single parent does not statistically bode well for his future chances in Mexico City according to social science research in the area: “Minors living in such households reportedly exhibit a proclivity towards anti-social and criminal behaviour. This is probably due to the fact that single mothers are often required to be out of the home for long periods to work and supervision tends to be more episodic. What is more, single-headed female house-holds tend to also feature lower levels of income that is also a characteristic of typical offending groups” (Vilalta and Muggah, 17). Thus, though he is privileged as being ‘above’ Benjamín simply because of a situation he was born into, Mónica’s ‘insurance policy’ of protecting his ability to see does not in any way guarantee that he will end up better off socially than his older counterpart.

<sup>7</sup> At one point, the child is asked his name and he mumbles an unintelligible response (potentially he says ‘Rodrigo’). This could be another nod to the invisible status that these children carry, unnoticed and uncared for by those of means, out of reach of assistance because they live on the streets. For all practical purposes, they are functionally invisible until they can somehow be of use to those with money.

Benjamín, who is undesirable to her due to the aforementioned societal ‘requirements’ regarding class and work. Benjamín has been punished for his apparent inability to serve society in a manner that is considered productive and, to Mónica’s chagrin, it appears that Omar is following in his footsteps. Omar’s reason for roaming the city with him, besides looking for the cat, is that Benjamín “es [su] amigo.” What follows is a conversation that further explicates Benjamín’s true reason for living with them, though Mónica will not admit it to her son, other than to point out his difference. First she says firmly that he “es muy distinto a ti,” in order to create a separation in Omar’s mind between himself and his new friend. She goes on to say, “[n]o se va a quedar con nosotros para toda la vida,” indicating that because he is not her son, he is not a member of their family: “[P]orque le estamos ayudando pero yo no nada más tengo un hijo.” She punctuates that with a final statement: “Yo no me puedo hacer responsable de Benjamín.” Mónica’s interest in this boy is only for what he can do for her personally, and subsequently for her son. The neoliberal individualism with which Mexico City functions is what allows her to callously toss Benjamín aside after she takes what she needs. He is “distinto” because he is less than, in both her and society’s eyes. This is evidenced by her later conversation with the doctor, after she struggles over knowing what will happen to Benjamín once she is done with him; in order to convince her, the surgeon says, “Omar es muy importante,” though what we can take this to mean is that “Omar es *más* importante.” The scene cuts, we watch as someone puts drops into Omar’s eyes, and then Benjamín is asked to go to the store; he won’t be back again. The next time we see him he is lying on the floor of a dump amidst heaps of trash, left to die.

Bauman further posits that this notion of work ethic promotes productivity while simultaneously providing an excuse to ignore the poor, given the emphasis on individualism as well as the productive members’ insistence on keeping the spoils of their alleged ‘contributions.’

While expecting all members of society to work is beneficial in that it encourages ‘contribution,’ at the same time it “dispos[es] of one of the most vexing nuisances the post-traditional society had to encounter—the necessity to provide for the needs of those who for one reason or another could not catch up with the change of circumstances, make ends meet and eke out their own existence under the new conditions” (11). Thus, not only are the wealthy even more entitled in this day and age to hoard everything they have, because of the individualistic ideals purported by hegemonic neoliberalism, they also simultaneously absolve themselves of true concern for those without means, ultimately leaving those disadvantaged by the systems they’ve put into effect culpable for the result of those very systems.

In fact, this justifies Mónica’s and the anonymous parents’ actions even further in that they have effectively ‘cleaned up the streets,’ in the sense that now fewer poor children are around, begging or otherwise getting into trouble. Though Benjamín is blinded at the end of *A los ojos*, left behind at a city dump without any inclination as to where he is or how to get home, Mónica’s hands are also clean, and she is absolved from providing him with further help, thanks to the neoliberal ideals which Harvey lays out; this poor person is poor because he has ‘failed’ to fulfill his duty to society, and thus he is no longer her responsibility, though he is worse off for knowing Mónica. Neoliberalism, in conjunction with a consumerist society’s attitudes towards the ethics of being poor, allow the elite to take direct advantage of the poor and then go on with their lives, blissfully unhampered by guilt, retreating to their money. This also justifies her dishonest behaviors towards Benjamín to begin with, in which she takes him in and falsely pretends to be caring for him while really just reassuring herself that her son’s organ donor will be sufficiently taken care of until his time comes for the surgery. Her attitude towards spending

time and money on someone else is perfectly reflected in her reaction to a cat found on the street by her son and live-in houseguest.

Mónica arrives home one afternoon to find Benjamín and Omar playing with a cat they found outside, “de la calle.” Benjamín announces, “[I]o vamos a cuidar,” to which she responds “[n]o se puede quedar.” When they protest, ironically mentioning the dangers of the street that Benjamín, up until now, has been forced to face daily for his entire life, she continues to refuse. They say “[s]e puede morir de...” and list a myriad of outside factors that people living on the streets of Mexico City are forced to endure from which those inside are free, and then ask, “¿Si lo tratan mal?” This cat provides the perfect foil for Benjamín in that those in power do nothing to care it, and they simultaneously ignore it, not considering what it must do in order to survive, and justifying their actions by assuming that to provide more would be equivalent to feeding a parasite. Also, chillingly, we already know that Mónica’s house, however warm, roofed, and moneyed it is by comparison to the streets, is not actually safe, as shown by Benjamín, who only appears to be treated well (though evidently is not). Mónica is only interested in what she can use; Benjamín is only here for what he can provide, and thus this conversation and refusal to care for the cat foreshadow what is to come. Benjamín is not here to stay; he will only be spending time in Mónica’s house for as long as he can see.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this conversation leads us to the connection placed between neoliberalism, money, work, and value. There is an inherently quantifiable value attached to all things in the neoliberal world. The cat is worth nothing, and so will not be helped; Benjamín is, in fact, of value, and so will enjoy the supposed ‘protection’ Mónica has to offer until his value depreciates.

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<sup>8</sup> Franco’s films place slow violence front and center. Here, as with *Chronic*, we see violence perpetuated by a supposed ‘caretaker.’

Another “tacit presumption” is posited by Bauman regarding the supposed cause-and-effect relationship between work ethic and personal wealth; following his theories, only “quantifiable labor,” that “which commands salaries or wages, which can be sold and is likely to be bought,” possesses “the moral value the work ethic commands” (6). This, in turn, results not only in the poor being spurned because they are not contributing in a way that is seen as effectively productive by society, but also in their moral denigration; thus, they are now poor because they deserve to be poor, and they would not be poor had they made better ethical choices. This further absolves Mónica and the actions of the wealthy parents of “Entre dos,” because they now also have the moral high ground. Benjamín and the ten-year-old found on the street would not be where they were found had they not simply ‘refused’ to work, thereby demonstrating their poor work ethic. Bauman’s studies, in conjunction with Harvey’s, explicate clearly how the free markets and laissez-faire attitudes connect to current ways of thought and associations with the poor. To make the notion of work ‘ethical’ in the sense that we have a moral obligation to it is to make it a virtual requirement of each member of society. Those who ‘fail’ to meet such requirements are thought of as just that: failures. Those who have ‘failed’ did so because of a supposed lack of morals, the result of which is what society thinks of as their ‘just desserts:’ life on the street, no upward mobility, and no opportunities.

Franco’s films examine Mexico City and its connection to the neoliberal consumerism that has led to the state of the poor as living in another world entirely, one at the mercy of those with means. As mentioned in my previous chapter, Franco’s depiction of Mexico City is consistent with the notion of the urban jungle, where those members of society who are at a distinct disadvantage, due to money, end up falling prey to the wealthy, driven out of their homes, forced to live on the street, and thought of only as commodities, of what they can

‘contribute’ alternatively. In Benjamín’s case, he sacrifices both of his corneas, and thus is left blind. For the anonymous child of “Entre dos,” he doesn’t manage to successfully escape with his life. Essentially, because they have failed to contribute in the traditional way, and because the notion of contribution is inherently tied to morals, they must pay for what they have not provided, in what is considered by the elite to be some sort of sick poetic justice, after having spent their entire lives virtually homeless and with no potential recourse for future quality of life or hope of traditional success.

The notion of consumption discussed here is one that is directly tied to the economy. Bauman defines our society as a “consumer society,” going on to define the consumer as “a person who consumes, and to consume means using things up...since in our part of the world it is money to satisfy which in most cases ‘mediates’ between desire and its satisfaction, being a consumer also means—normally means—appropriating most of the things destined to be consumed” (23). In Franco’s case, what is being directly consumed is the physical body, given that undesirable members of society are used for organ harvesting thusly. Ironically, though they have failed to provide adequate societal contribution and they lack money as well, they must still ‘pay’ in one sense or another, eventually providing some sort of contribution as the wealthy see fit. Their absence from the established ‘system’ does not excuse them from it, and so the wealthy are at liberty to determine how they will take advantage of the people who they consider to be drains on society.

In Franco’s films, because there is no money left to take from them, they pay in organs, one boy with his life and the other with his ability to see. This class violence, objective violence according to Slavoj Žižek’s theorization because it works slowly, permeating our lives without visibly upsetting the norm, is thus converted into subjective, physical violence in that the norm is

disrupted, and these two young men are physically violated.<sup>9</sup> Franco's short film, and its reprise, offer a chilling though realistic view of the attitudes displayed towards poor youth. Essentially, because these people have not contributed to society in a way that the upper class sees fit, they are denigrated and invisible. They go totally unnoticed until someone finds a use for them, and Franco highlights this moment perfectly in "Entre dos," with an emphasis on the gaze of the protagonists.

After the young boy gets up to wash his hands, a front take lingers on the couple seated at the table as they begin to eat. However, the father continues to stay seated, contemplative, not yet touching his food as he slowly looks up at his wife. She has already lifted her fork, but meets his gaze. This look is positioned as the pivotal moment of the film, where the couple's machinations first start to take hold, as the sound bridge then brings us from the table at the café to the doctors' conversation about organ trafficking. The protagonist refuses to search on the black market, but his gaze toward the rest of the city implies that he has already found the solution to his problems on its streets. Intercutting between this conversation, surgery, the nervous mother, and the protagonists back in the café looking out the window at blurred street children, then back to surgery, the nervous mother once again, and finally their conversation, inform us of which option they finally chose.

The café where the plan was first birthed becomes the film's pivotal location, as further flashback shots, more of the couple up late at night, pleading with other sick children's parents in the hospital, the male protagonist contemplating in the hospital's chapel, and the female protagonist approaching the boy in the street, all end up returning to them seated at the table. Franco's shot of the father in church indicates the struggle he grapples with as he attempts to

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth analysis of Žižek's theories on the multiple forms of violence.

save his son, and his feelings are juxtaposed by the insistence of another potential (legal) donor's father saying emphatically, "Mi hijo no se va a morir." This minor character provides a foil for the male protagonist, in that he is essentially making the same refusal in saving his child by any means possible. The composition of the shots at the café indicate what is "entre dos," the secret this couple shares in procuring an illegal donor for their son and devoting themselves to committing violent crimes, is also something that comes 'between the two' emotionally, given their inability to sleep and the mother's sidelong glances at the boy who she plans to kill. What begins as a fleeting idea in the husband's mind becomes an insistence of the mother's, and Franco positions the two of them in front of the café window, the negative space of the background in between their faces filled by blurred images of children who are selectively visible, only considered when they are potentially worth something to those in power.

Violence works invisibly against them, due to the neoliberal state, individualistic attitudes, and the reigning notion that to not work is to choose not to work, and simultaneously they become invisible. The elite have found a way to justifiably ignore the greater economical problems at hand, to their own advantage, and thus Benjamín and the young unnamed boy from "Entre dos" become invisible, in that they are ignored and unnoticed until someone can use them to their own advantage. It is interesting to consider Mónica's line of work here, given that as someone in social services, it is her job to help those in need, and to give attention to those without; essentially, Mónica's life's work is to assist in making visible those who are invisible. However, the film's ending raises some chilling, though important, questions. We see Mónica make 'home' visits to several of her clients. Seeing how she treats Benjamín in the end, leaving him lying in a dump, unable to see, presumably without any idea where he is, begs the question: what was motivating her to spend so much time with the other youth? Does she stand to benefit

from them in any way? Her determination to help her son, who is not at risk of losing his life, but rather his sight, is unprecedented though concerning in the lack of forethought she displays for others.

Ultimately, what little more Mónica has over Benjamín is what excuses her to retreat to her money; the economic advantages she has afford her the option to side with the same upper class who ignore people like her clients and have created a need for her profession. The system that has made Mónica's life more difficult than many is what also ultimately allows her to wash her hands of the poor after harming them to satisfy her own needs. The neoliberal society which Franco brings to the forefront of his films is one that is ever-growing, the same way the urban jungle of Mexico City's "mancha urbana" appears to be unstoppable, in that the elitist attitudes trickle down as well, permeating the thought processes of everyday citizens and numbing them to the problems which their compatriots face (Villoro 166). It isn't enough for Mónica to simply ignore those less fortunate than she is; rather, they must pay for their 'failure' to contribute while simultaneously raising her status.

We must remember that Mónica's son, Omar, is not facing a life-threatening illness. As callous as it may seem, people go blind daily and live to tell the tale. Moreover, people who only have vision in one eye are not blind at all, but rather function relatively normally. However, we cannot forget that Benjamín is robbed of his eyes on two separate occasions. The first surgery leaves him blind in one eye and allows Omar to regain his sight in the eye that most desperately needed attention. Mónica could stop here, recognizing the irreparable damage she has done to an innocent adolescent in the name of helping her son. After waking up from the first surgery, his question ("¿Qué hicieron?") is one that speaks volumes. His life is one that has been lived in spite of what others have done to him, though the very portion of society which acts against him

chooses to blame him, in turn, for failing to adequately provide for himself. Mónica lies to him about how he was injured and she keeps Benjamín at her house, under the guise of rehabilitating him, all the while planning to perform another illegal surgery. She instructs him to go out for groceries, Franco cuts the scene, and we are back in the operation room, knowing what is to come. Omar will leave with two corneas, and Benjamín will never see again, and he will also no longer enjoy the services with which Mónica has been providing him, given that she kept him around solely for his prospects as an organ donor, and nothing more.

Research on the commodification of the body by Lesley Sharp demonstrates a connection between how we look and how we are perceived. While bodies are physically transformed due to medical practice and science, “[m]yriad forms of objectification rapidly displace the self, exposing the human body to the world of commerce” (314). This “generates an array of anxieties... ultimately exposing the hidden links between consumption, demand, and desire” (314). Specifically speaking of organ transfer, Sharp poses a critical question in such an age of consumption: “[M]ight we begin to speak of commerce in luxury goods of human origin?” (314). Ultimately, Benjamín is seen only for what he can offer to Omar physically, and as a member of Mexico City’s lower class, this results in body parts. This also speaks to Mónica’s wishes for Omar. If all she wanted a son that wasn’t handicapped by blindness, she would stop at the first surgery. However, in her current society, she must have a perfect son who has full control of his physical faculties. It is not enough for Omar to merely be able to see, but rather he must be a perfect physical specimen. It is for this reason that Benjamín must suffer doubly, so that Omar can remain objectively ‘perfect’ according to societal standards, free from marginalization due to physical differences from those around him. Ironically, Mónica’s understanding of how the

marginalized are treated in Mexico City is part of her motivation for taking advantage of that very population, in order to ensure that her son will not end up a part of it himself.

Both “Entre dos” and *A los ojos* are vehicles for Franco to discuss the neoliberal attitudes that permeate Mexico City, resulting in the negligent treatment of the poor which he depicts in strikingly realistic ways. Auditory codes of unedited sound inundate us with the noise of the city as we watch those living in the street begging and then going subsequently ignored by wealthier citizens. We come to understand, as well, just how easy it is for them to be taken advantage of, given their complete invisibility unless someone higher up on the food chain deems them valuable in some sort of fashion alternative to the quantifiable labor that comes to be expected of those with greater privilege. Franco’s films portray Mexico City as an urban jungle, made so by neoliberal policies and individualistic attitudes, to the detriment of its most vulnerable citizens.

## Chapter 3

### From the Social to the Personal: Spaces and Trauma

Upon establishing Mexico City as a violent public space, in part due to the government's perpetuation of the neoliberal system, Franco further posits it as inherently violent on a personal level. It is important to recognize here the multiple forms of violence with which he provides us, then, given that both the public and private realms are on display. At every turn, Franco's films demonstrate violence, albeit one that is slow, chilling, and affective in that it becomes very real for the spectator as well. Part of what is at play, another trope, is the complicity of the spectator, given the position in which we are placed. Though we are required to identify with his characters, we are also complicit in their very consumption. In this chapter, I intend to explore these broader themes on violence, as well as consider spectatorial complicity the way Franco demands of his audiences. The introduction of *Chronic* demonstrates the universality of violence, in that this film is equally as disturbing as the remainder of Franco's oeuvre, though not concerned with specifically Latin American issues. However, in both *Después de Lucía* and *Chronic* (and the rest of his films as well) the types of violence that permeate these worlds change. We must first understand the theorization of violence before delving deeper into the spaces more specifically.

Slavoj Žižek discusses violence in such a way that allows us to recognize it in every form, thereby enlightening us by demonstrating that what was first unrecognizable as abject violence, such as the means by which *Chronic's* David takes advantage of his patients, is now clearly elucidated. "The most visible" form of violence is what Žižek terms 'subjective violence,' and it is recognizable because it is seen "against the background of the non-violent

zero level,” functioning as “a perturbation of the ‘normal,’ peaceful state of things” (2). The bullying that Alejandra faces in school, or the kidnapping and forced incest faced by the titular characters in *Daniel y Ana*, and Mónica’s treatment of Benjamín in *A los ojos*, are examples of this ‘subjective violence’ in a clear, brutal way. All of Franco’s films heavily feature this type of subjective violence in one form or another. However, his works are also astoundingly focused on and concerned with Žižek’s ‘objective violence,’ what is first perceived as “invisible,” given that it does not abjectly horrify us at first because it does not stand out, but rather functions as “the notorious ‘dark matter’ of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence,” in that it is systemic, slow-growing, and more easily slips through the cracks in comparison to the latent brutality inherent to these works (2). Thus, this chapter will focus on both of these types of violence given Franco’s discussion of it as a theme inherent to daily life. I intend to delve further into Franco’s explorations of space as the root of this violence, while also later focusing on the further implications of it at later points in his characters’ lives through their engagements in the moments of becoming, their gender expression, and the violence that they perpetuate as a result.

### ***The violence of private spaces in Después de Lucía***

*Después de Lucía* provides a narrative concerned with the behavior of high-school-aged adolescents confronted with female transgressions of social norms. After Alejandra’s mother, Lucía, dies in a car accident in Puerto Vallarta, Alejandra and her father, Roberto, move to Mexico City for a fresh start. It is important to note the idea that spaces are ‘humanized’ by those who inhabit them<sup>10</sup>; thus, Alejandra’s connection to the car where her mother died is one that evokes the presence of Lucía. That, and the film’s title, “*Después*” *de Lucía*, imply an invisible

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<sup>10</sup> See previous discussion of Lynne Manzo’s theory in Chapter 1, page 18.

timeline which includes an ‘Antes,’ which marks us temporally in the ‘Antes’ at times, and the ‘Después,’ in others. Thus, the film’s plot, and its title, “After Lucía,” revolves around this female character that we never see, and a timeline that directs us to an equally unknown period in the characters’ lives, the ‘Before.’ It is imperative to remember here that the time, similarly to the space, not only affects Franco’s characters but his audience as well, given that it situates us in a liminal temporal space. While watching, we are required to bear the same confusion as Roberto and Alejandra, viewing their interpretation of the situation and the space through their eyes.

Just as Franco’s audience members may at first not understand their location in this timeline, Alejandra is stuck, straddling childhood adolescence and adulthood at this moment of change in her life. At many points, the expression of Alejandra’s identity is in flux, at times conflicting different images of herself; sometimes she seems more concerned with issues of adolescence, while at others she acts more mature, taking on her role as the new woman of the house, as well as in her relationship with Roberto. As her roles change, her appearance becomes strikingly different as well. With this taking on and off of different roles come problems at school and with her understanding of herself. The spaces she encounters, retreats to, and runs from, indicate the lived traumatic experience as deeply connected to her surroundings, and thus serve as indicators for the audience, foreshadowing the violence to come.

Much of the spaces explored in Franco’s films are ‘troubled’ because they carry the emotional weight of his characters, such as Lucía’s car, or the new apartment in Mexico City, which Ale suggests they fill with memories of Puerto Vallarta. These troubled spaces reflect not just one character’s emotional turmoil, but also that of their entire family. In part, these spaces are what I call ‘troubled spaces’ because they are familial spaces. In this more distinct summation of how we view space, I propose that we can delve even deeper by examining highly

personal spaces as well, such as Franco's exploration of the vehicle in *Después de Lucía*, where the characters' unique experiences in cars leave them with varying levels of distress where the vehicles themselves are concerned. Manzo's investigations of "experience-in-place" are inherent to our later understanding of Franco's exploration of space at the 'micro' level.

These psychological investigations of space establish a strong connection between the emotions experienced in the spaces, Manzo's "experience-in-place," and the spaces themselves, allowing us to understand Franco's deliberate emphasis on transportation in the film as well. For Alejandra and Roberto, Lucía's car is overwhelmingly significant because it is where Lucía dies, and moreover, the beginning of this new temporal chapter: it represents the end of the 'Antes,' and simultaneously the beginning of the 'Después.' Because of this pre-established emphasis on transportation, I believe that Franco establishes a certain emotional significance for every space associated with transportation in the film, because they reiterate the trip taken on this timeline. What begins with Lucía's car as a symbol of the characters' new trajectories permeates the rest of these spaces as well. These vehicles reflect the timeline emotionally and affectively, given that they visually represent the mental spaces of the characters as they navigate the world of the 'Después.' To relate these spaces with his characters' psyches, Franco establishes them as 'troubled,' demonstrating that they are the source of larger problems in the characters' lives within the diegesis. From the start, then, we understand the vehicle as a troubled space, established by Lucía's death in the car with Alejandra at the wheel.

The film starts inside of the car, with our point of view determined through the most troubled space of all, given that it is the root cause of the accident that changed their lives. The camera is situated inside the car, and establishes a connection between Lucía, of the 'Antes,' and us, through the space. Ultimately, we occupy the final space of Lucía, and because of this we

view the beginning of the film through her perspective in the sense that the space is demarcated by her presence. This is not to say that we view the film and the lives of her surviving family members through her eyes, but rather that the space is charged with her presence. It is a space that evokes Lucía, and so Alejandra and Roberto are affected by what it evokes.

In discussing car culture, Daniel Miller mentions that though the car is “humanized” in the sense that we have begun to “think our world through a sense of the self in which driving, roads, and traffic are simply integral to who we are and what we presume to do each day,” at the same time “the car is the villain that has separated us from the world and threatens to take over as we come to serve it more than it serves us” (2-3). This understanding of the car as humanized while simultaneously detrimental to our ‘experience-in-place’ is one that Franco’s first scene demonstrates; we wait inside of Lucía’s car while we watch two men, (a man working at the garage who is accompanying Roberto, and Roberto himself), approach us. They get closer as we wait in the space evocative of Lucía’s death, and we listen while the garage worker explains that after the crash, virtually every part of the car had to be fixed or replaced. With this gesture, Franco raises an interesting metaphorical question, reiterating the Ship of Theseus: is this really Lucía’s car? If every part is new, the car that we occupy is another space, a new space, in the sense that it has been irrevocably altered (much like the course of Ale’s and Roberto’s lives).

The investigations of space that I have explored demonstrate the emotional weight carried by different spaces as significant. Although time has passed, and although this car is completely different, Franco further establishes a strong connection with the vehicle. It functions as a link between the ‘Antes’ and ‘Después,’ and while it represents the act of transport in a literal way, at the same time it metaphorically represents the new trajectories of Roberto and Alejandra. The act of navigating Mexico City with the car, from Puerto Vallarta, complements

via the diegesis the same way that the two will be required to re-navigate and negotiate their lives from now on, given that Lucía is no longer present. By using space to establish a timeline of sorts, the car represents a liminal space in that it serves as a border between the ‘Antes’ and ‘Después.’

While the film’s main plot concerns the protagonists’ ability to recuperate from a traumatic experience, the emphasis on Lucía’s car at the beginning foreshadows the problems to come as they try to move on. At times, we see each character is more focused in the ‘Antes’ or the ‘Después’, depending on their emotions in the given moment. Thus, the troubled spaces established by Franco affect their transitions from the ‘Antes’ to the ‘Después,’ metaphorically, and so the spaces that surround them become even more troubled after longer periods of time. These spaces serve to influence their progress emotionally, as well our understanding of their ability to recuperate from trauma. Their comportment changes relative to the space and at times they straddle the in-between, at others vacillating in their progression. Their ability to recuperate, in a way, is determined by the space.

Lucía’s car is a point of contention between Roberto and Ale, given that their processes of recuperation are very different from one another. At times, one has progressed further than the other. At one point, Roberto wants to remain firmly in the ‘Antes,’ and this is very evident in his use of Lucía’s newly repaired vehicle. After the first scene, while we remain in the backseat of the car, Roberto drives through the streets of Mexico City and becomes angered by another driver. He immediately stops, leaves the car, and begins to engage in fisticuffs with the stranger. Although we can read this scene as a display of his machismo in what Traci Roberts-Camps has defined as “a patriarchal society that celebrates hyper-masculinity and male sexuality,” what it really represents is Roberto’s lack of control, and furthermore, his weakness (149). Mike

Michael, another scholar of car culture, notes that “[t]he car is an extension of personal territory, and if this is impinged upon aggressive territoriality is triggered” (62). Thus, the space that is the root of Roberto’s problems and leads him to give in to his road rage also represents his territory. After the fight, Roberto abandons the vehicle leaving it by the side of the road and informing his daughter that he sold it, as if the space is too troubling for him to bear at all. Franco’s discussion of space in the film, and the importance of the connection between space and memory, is also deeply connected to ownership. Being challenged in this space is even more of a provocation for Roberto given its complicated past, which could explain why he abandons it altogether.

At Alejandra’s individual level, severe violence and bullying are the result of a social transgression made in school. After becoming involved with Camila’s ‘boyfriend,’ José, at a party held by her new group of friends, their sex tape is leaked and distributed among their peers.<sup>11</sup> We must bear in mind that throughout Alejandra’s harassment, the audience’s position is one of complicity. We vacillate as spectators, at times simply observing (which in a way, marks our complicity similar to that of the rest of the student body who do not act defensively but also do not do direct harm). In other instances, we become an active part of the problem, during scenes in which Franco encourages active viewing, rather than passive spectatorship. To ‘celebrate’ Alejandra’s birthday, several students bring her a prank cake and surround her, circling her desk so that she can’t escape. However, there’s an open spot in the circle, through which the camera views the incident. As Ale is force-fed to the point of vomiting on herself, we

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<sup>11</sup> There is no direct indication in the film that Camila and José are seeing one another exclusively, though her insistence on commanding his attention throughout the film is key, in that it denotes some sort of relationship status that Alejandra unwittingly disrupts. This disruption is what prompts the violence of her female classmates. We see their relationship put on display in multiple scenes: when they embrace each other while lying down in the grass outside the school, Camila’s insistence on sitting next to him in class, their heavy petting session at the party on the field trip in Veracruz, etc.

sit in this open spot as well, thus proving that as passive observers in earlier scenes, we too may be interpreted as bullies ourselves.

Franco implies that we are culpable in her demise, because no one in the group is willing enough to stand up for her. Thus, as an audience we experience an ethical transformation because we become, through our mediatic presence, associated with the position of the abusers as well. Given Roy Rappaport's assertion that "[n]othing can be experienced more immediately than the sensations of one's own body, and if the mark is indelible...it is ever-present," we see that the pain Alejandra is forced to endure is something which begins to permeate her very existence; simultaneously, Franco highlights that we are part of its cause. At the same time, the audience shares the sensations, in accordance with Jennifer Barker's theory on affect and cinematic tactility, "wherein all parts of the body commit themselves to, or are drawn into, a relationship with the world that is at once a mutual and intimate relation of contact" (3). This scene with the cake, especially, is one that establishes a "visceral engagement" between the viewers' bodies and the film, in that we are both part of what is being done to Ale as well as experiencing it ourselves (4).

A class field trip to Veracruz serves as another example of audience complicity. While Ale is locked in the bathroom, the rest of the students party in the hotel room right outside. At times, the camera lingers in the hotel room, allowing us to enjoy ourselves, physically situated within the diegesis from the spectatorial standpoint of another youth in the scene. We are complicit once again, watching Camila kiss José on the bed during the party, masturbating him publically, expressed even more graphically than how we saw Ale with him; perhaps this act is deemed socially acceptable because it happens within the confines of their established 'relationship,' whereas Ale and José had no pre-established union. While this goes on, their

classmate El Gordito enters the bathroom where Ale is trapped and forces her, we may deduce, to have sex with him. The actual scene of intercourse is left unseen, perhaps a reflection of the relationship between visibility-invisibility and the broader phenomenon of sexting (the results of which provided proof of the encounter with José, thereby simultaneously providing evidence of the social transgression for which she must be punished).

After a bonfire at the beach, to which Ale is physically dragged, she is urinated on. This prompts her to wash herself in the ocean. The subsequent scene is marked by a sensation of anxiety, as Ale disappears from our and her peers' view, presumably drowned as a final act in her demise. This, we learn later, however, is proven false, as Ale the avid swimmer uses the ocean as an opportunity to escape, travelling back to her childhood home in Puerto Vallarta without notifying anyone. The regression of her character as a sexual threat, forced to limit herself and her actions by her peers, is complete; she is no longer a sexual threat to the order of the school, because she is no longer a sexual person – she is once again a child in the diegetic space of '*Antes de' Lucía*. The humiliation that she endures socially by her peers denigrates her once again to a child. This change in comportment is the result of pain, which “recalls historical memory and creates new subjects, partly through the transfer of pain and knowledge, partly through divination of new and meaningful futures” (García 468). Alejandra is now a new subject, unfortunately created and reduced by the social norms perpetuated by her classmates that she unwittingly transgressed. At the same time, García also notes that scars are the “truth” of recovery, and as a reflection of the culture in the narrative, Ale ends up on the way to recovery after running away at the end of the film (467).

When he finally learns of the bullying that his daughter was forced to endure (after she's already run away and is supposedly dead), Roberto exacts his revenge by kidnapping, and

subsequently killing José after he is exposed for distributing their sex tape online. We see Roberto steering the boat with confidence, in control, decided on how he will vet out his vengeance. Finally, we see his face while he operates a vehicle (the boat), which up until now has been hidden as he drives, perhaps a sign of his ability to move forward now that he is unhindered by the car that was so troubling for him. A long take positions us at the bow of the boat, with Roberto sitting by the stern to steer, stony-faced, looking for the right spot as José sits bound and gagged beside him. He finally stops, and in a swift motion grabs José and tosses him overboard, ignoring his protests. After he rids himself of the boy, he resumes his position at the rudder, looking ahead with the same cold stare. In finally taking control after staying powerless up until this point in the film, given his multiple emotional outbursts and fits of anger, Roberto is able to act of his own accord unhindered by the fear that he will lose control. In both his and his daughter's case, the water allows them to move forward, rather than hindering them as the streets of Mexico City have.

With *Después de Lucía*, Franco establishes a linear timeline in order to allow his audience and the characters within the diegesis to navigate the story before and after her death. The troubled spaces, oftentimes associated with transportation, with which he presents us metaphorically, direct us to this timeline that also reflects Roberto's and Alejandra's trajectories after the trauma. Literally, these spaces function in a way that allows their characters to move through the diegetic space of Mexico City, while simultaneously attaching a psychological and emotional significance to the characters' lived experiences. The spaces are given this significance based on the 'experience-in-place' that happens inside of them. In Franco's film, Lucía, someone who we never see or hear but is undoubtedly present in the film, humanizes each space. Just like his characters, the audience vacillates between the 'Antes' and 'Después,'

demonstrating the importance of spatial environment to the recuperation process after a traumatic experience.

### ***Forced subjugation of patients in Chronic***

Franco's *Chronic* was released in 2015, and is his only film to date that does not take place in Mexico, but rather another, unnamed city in the United States. While each of his previous films have concerned primarily subjective violence, the violence of *Chronic* serves as an exception to the rule, instead building slowly, functioning in disguise, secondary in our minds to the disruption that subjective violence brings. The systemic, objective violence featured in *Chronic* is surprisingly committed and instigated by its protagonist, an element Franco had not previously revisited since "Entre dos." Though he alters the discourse with this film, it in fact adds to Franco's auteur title in that he continues his exploration of violence in whatever form, as well as using it to permeate every aspect of the diegesis. Though set in another country, and though it employs a slower sort of violence, *Chronic* makes a fitting addition to Franco's oeuvre. While this film demarks a distinct evolution from his others, *Chronic* requires its audience to make a striking realization about violence in asking them to first understand and identify with its root cause, their protagonist David.

As with his other works, *Chronic* begins inside of a car, but this time it is parked, and the camera looks through the driver's point of view. A long take lingers, wandering, while we observe a house and watch as a woman enters her own car, and begins to drive in the following shot. We begin to drive as well, pursuing her, and a small movement of the camera finally shows us the side of the conductor's face. An abrupt cut then leads to the front of a computer screen, a Facebook profile on the display; we are 'Facebook stalking' a girl named 'Nadia Wilson,'

rapidly clicking through her photos without any context of her identity, or our own. Though we've been seeing everything up until this point through the protagonist's point of view, we have yet to see his full face. At this temporal point, these scenes seem unrelated to each other and there is no demonstrated reason for the narrative change, as the point of view has remained the same. In each scene, while we drive and while we visit Facebook's website, the point of view is identical, indicating that the Facebook 'stalker' was the man in the car. The protagonist then, remains unknown to us as well as unnamed, and is therefore established as a sinister figure in the following scenes. In just our first glimpses, he's portrayed as a predator of sorts, in the sense that he acts in the pursuit of others. He actively follows one person outside at the start, and this act is immediately juxtaposed with his pursuit of another woman online. In the first case, Franco does not provide us with a reason for following the woman as she drives, and in the second, the protagonist clicks several times to view all of the photos and closely read the captions in an intimate fashion, as if 'Nadia Wilson' is someone familiar to him, and he follows her frequently. Thus, from the start of the film Franco establishes sinister events, possibly foreshadowing the violence to come, as acts associated with and perpetuated by his protagonist.

The violence of this film is mostly objective, unseen and hidden, slowly growing and taking over the characters' lives (as violence always does in Franco's films), the sort of violence that often goes unnoticed. *Chronic* as a film mimics objective violence in this way, hiding David's inclinations towards violence at first, and merely alluding to it as he does in the first couple of scenes. We first simply see David, after finally seeing him for the first time, as a (primarily) elderly persons' caretaker, working with patients who are suffering from chronic illnesses. He works for an agency that assigns caretakers to patients, though we discover this after he is established first as a person who follows other people unbeknownst to them. After

discovering his line of work, the knowledge with which we were just recently provided thus functions as a sort of malevolent foreshadowing. What David actually represents is a threat in every form as he works with debilitated people who are unable to care for themselves.

The film is told through David's eyes, representing him as a caretaker, who appears to take care of multiple patients, one after the other. We come to learn that he has devoted his life to caregiving in way that goes beyond it being simply his profession, but rather how he assigns himself an identity. Stephen Holden notes this blankness in his review, comparing him to a "polite, expressionless deputy of the Grim Reaper" (Holden). We see him with four patients in succession, after leaving each individual job for one reason or another. In analyzing these relationships, we must not forget that subjective and objective violence function together. Subjective violence is often a result of objective violence, the violence that we constantly see and constantly forget, although it rules the daily lives of millions of people. Franco's introduction of four individual patients mimics this violence, creating yet another binary; each form of violence that we see in David's relationships with his patients progressively grows more and more extreme. What starts as David's objective violence goes on to become subjective violence, direct and inevitable, after many years of working in objectively violent ways.

### **Sarah**

After intensely following and looking at Nadia Wilson's photos on Facebook, an abrupt cut brings us to blackout, and the title appears on the screen. This cut, blackout, and the introduction of the title establish yet another timeline, this one emphasizing David's career with his patients. When we return to the film, we watch an emaciated woman in the shower, supported and washed by David. She appears to be catatonic, staring off into space, and doesn't speak for several minutes; although David speaks to her, she does not respond. A long take of medium

distance focuses on the shower, though the walls on either side of the bathroom door block the point of view through which we observe. This type of frame appears many times in the film, and functions to serve as a visual border. At this moment in time, we still do not know who David is; perhaps, he is a family member of the woman whom he takes care of. A few scenes later, after realizing that he is employed by a caretaking agency, and not related to his patients in any way, this sort of structuring by Franco makes more sense, as it serves to establish a necessary boundary between the patient and those who are not the patient themselves or their family.

We come to understand that David has far too close an attachment to his patients; he clearly does not think of himself as an employee or a person separate from them, but rather inserts himself into their lives. When we see him in his own house, (very infrequently), he sits with a blank stare, gazing off into the distance, apathetic and bored. Franco's film demonstrates that ultimately, he lives for his patients although he has formed inappropriate connections to them. Thus, I propose that Franco uses such clear framing elements, deliberately blocking our observation of these patients through doorways or walls, in order to do two things:

- 1) The borders separate the private lives of the patients from what would normally be seen by the public (were they not chronically ill). Although we have glimpses of their private lives, we cannot enter; the framing forms a border that separates us from them in one form or another, giving them a bit of dignity (albeit not very much).
- 2) At the same time, we watch David on the other side of the doorway. Thus, he literally crosses this established border physically, while simultaneously doing so emotionally. This emotional border is the boundary between caretaker and family, and he transgresses it in each relationship he has with his patients. He enters into their

private lives and participates in ways that are too close, with a clear emotional attachment to them, and so they have no right to any personal privacy away from him.

After this scene, another shot framed by two walls separates us from Sarah while she eats lunch. The camera is situated in the doorway; as David prepares the food and cleans up in the kitchen, (positioned farther back than his own patient, in her own home), we watch Sarah on one side of the screen, waiting at the table. At times, David moves to do something and we cannot see him; this is another instance of the border that we cannot cross because we do not, and should not, have access to this part of Sarah's life. With Sarah in plain view and David hidden off-screen, Franco insinuates that David has more access and mobility in his patient's house than she does herself. These scenes are the first of the film, after the introduction of the title card. Thus, in a very direct fashion beginning at the start of the film, Franco establishes David as someone that is quietly intrusive, but intrusive all the same, without (yet) showing us through his direct actions. For now, he seems reasonable enough as a caretaker simply performing his job for an invalid, though Franco's framing shots foreshadow the latent violence to come.

Ironically, the most intrusive advantage that we see taken of Sarah by David happens after her death (though the examples will be more and more direct as we see him with other patients). We watch as David attends the funeral and then ends up in a bar alone. Sitting between two separate people at the bar, each in attendance with other people they know, a woman to his right strikes up a conversation. She is recently engaged and will marry soon; she asks him questions about his life, and David describes his recently deceased wife. He says simply, "I took care of her," and explains that they were married for 21 years. In reality, Sarah was his patient, and to discover that he thought of her as his spouse is incredibly unnerving, and certainly not a professional attitude for someone of his position to have. It demonstrates further this type of

slow, objective, violence that at first goes unnoticed; he intertwines the identity of his patient with his own, using her for his own motivations. Her agency is denigrated to the identity that he assigns to her; she has no identity of her own, but rather serves what he thinks of her in relation to himself. Thus the film's language also functions as a form of objective violence, in that it is subtle but systemic, something that we notice sometimes but at others, goes unseen (much like Franco's use of framing). With one phrase, David erases and removes the identity of his patient in order to use it to perpetuate his own narrative.

This obsession with controlling his patients' lives evokes real-life circumstances in which patients are forced to remain invalids, though perhaps are not truly sick, due to their caretakers' false documentation and manipulation. Munchausen's syndrome occurs when 'patients' falsify the extent of their suffering, convincing others that they are sick in order to "[obtain] attention and nurturance" or in the interest of "controlling others" (McCulloch 965). Munchausen's by Proxy is the same, an imagined illness, but promulgated by another person, rather than the patient themselves, and "refers to a caregiver's fabricating or inducing illness in a dependent individual in response to similar incentives" (965). The illness itself is not legitimate, but rather a "factitious disorder;" the significant difference is that in the case of Munchausen's 'by proxy,' "the syndrome is perpetrated on others" (Pasqualone, et. al. 53). Although of course we cannot prove that David actively makes his patients sicker, at the same time his own sense of identity and purpose is clearly tied up in those of his patients'. He clearly identifies so deeply with his role of 'caregiver' that it appears he cannot function without them. For this reason, almost the entire film is comprised of his dealings with his patients; we almost never see him act of his own accord, but rather in accordance to his patients.

In the film, David is almost never alone. When he's at home, he is in a state of weariness and boredom. Alone, he doesn't talk with anyone, he doesn't watch television, and he doesn't read. He simply sits in an armchair, against a wall, not even taking up his own space, and stares off. At times, we see him exercising; he is an avid runner, and we often see him on the treadmill at the gym, shot in medium takes, head on. The act of running, and the treadmill itself, is another trope of Franco's; in *Daniel y Ana*, he documents the progression of his characters physically, with their marathon training. The lack of motion (on the treadmill) is juxtaposed with the act of running; although the person on the treadmill is moving, they aren't actually moving forward but rather running in place. The treadmill here metaphorically represents David and his lack of identity; he doesn't move, progress, or improve upon himself, but rather intertwines his own identity with those of the people it is his job to care for. In this way, *Munchausen's by Proxy* seems an appropriate estimation for the root of his issues. If he didn't have patients to take care of, would he have a sense of self? These first few scenes, although not actively violent, demonstrate David's lack of existential success, in that his life clearly has no meaning beyond his patients. However, this obsession with caretaking also becomes harmful for his patients, rather than affirming, given that they are denied their identities, which causes problems for their families as well.

### **John**

After Sarah's death, David begins caring for John, an older man who has suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Immediately, the relationship is established as inappropriate; John wants to watch pornography on his tablet, and David watches it with him. While they spend time together, they periodically hold hands, an act initiated by David. At times, when his shift is ending and another nurse comes to relieve him, David will tell them to go, feigning the act of doing them a

favor while really choosing to stay simply because he wants to, without the permission of John's family or the agency's knowledge. The film's promotional cover depicts David helping John; his position seems to be a hug, with David leaning over the bed, his arms around his patient. However, it is also reminiscent of an aggressive hold, such as those seen in wrestling. With this relationship, Franco creates a narrative framework; David's relationship with Sarah was shown to be most problematic after her death, when we learned of David's true feelings. In his working relationship with John, his lack of boundaries is evident from the start.

Cultural studies of the elderly have proven them to be a "vulnerable" population due to their isolation, and thus put them in an "urgent" situation (Richard and Wallace, 10). This isolation leaves them vulnerable not just to the other people around them, but also to other illnesses and mental disorders, as it has been noted that "[a]geing is the highest risk factor of failing health" (Kvaal et. al. 104). John's family is evidently cognizant of the relationship David carries on with him, and ultimately they file a formal complaint to the agency, accusing David of sexual assault after discovering his insistence in staying past his shifts and the pornography he watches with John. After seeing John's evident erection, the result of his interactions with David, they threaten to sue. Although the agency is tolerant of David, they demand that he cease communicating with John or his family; immediately after this stern conversation with his boss, David drives directly to John's home and asks to speak with them. In this instance, David essentially becomes John's 'stalker,' as he was with Nadia Wilson (the young woman on Facebook, who turns out to be his estranged daughter). Now, not only has he moved on from pursuing people online to doing so in the real world, he is also actively ignoring the instructions he's received at work as well as the wishes of John's family, and the law.

Thus, in each relationship of David's that we see, he becomes increasingly more aggressive, and so Franco positions him as an objectively violent person. The violence David perpetuates is unexpected, silent, and seemingly harmless, though he evidently has boundary issues.

### **Martha**

Martha is David's final 'true' patient, because he actually spends a large amount of time with her and seems to find a friend in her. After reconnecting with his daughter, Nadia, David begins to communicate with her more, and discovers that she enjoys hearing about his patients. He invites Nadia to meet Martha, and they begin to spend more time together. We come to see in Martha just how isolated chronically ill people are, given the difficulty they have connecting with their family. In Martha's case, her family does not have patience for her and rarely call. They never visit or meet her, and ignore her as many sick people are ignored, making up a very marginalized population, "an extension of the disease" from which they suffer (Gilman 4). The only people Martha regularly spends time with are David and Nadia. Although in some ways this seems to be the healthiest relationship David has with any of his patients, it is in his relationship with Martha that his objective violence evolves, and David becomes a subjectively violent character (enacting physical harm).

After discovering that her cancer has metastasized, Martha's death is imminent. After learning the reason for David's divorce and subsequent estrangement from his daughter, (he mercifully killed his infant son after his diagnosis of a chronic illness), she asks him to do her a favor; she wants David to assist in her medical suicide. From the outset, David refuses her, and she spitefully informs him that she will no longer require his assistance. After mulling it over, knowing that he will 'lose' his patient if he refuses, David reconsiders and promises to help her.

Although the situation is complicated and at times understandable, given their apparent, if not inappropriate, friendship and that the favor was at Martha's behest, at the same time, in this instance David moves from an objectively violent character to a subjectively violent one. He killed his son, and now he has killed his patient, regardless of intent. Simultaneously, David's attachment to his patients leads the viewer to believe that he assists in Martha's suicide less because he doesn't want her to suffer, and more because he doesn't want her to be upset with him. The reconsideration, directly preceded by her termination of their relationship, was made because he did not want to lose the person whose identity was so wrapped up in his own. He cannot live without her, and so once again, he lives for his patients in a directly harmful way. The circle is complete; the film began with violent language and framing (in relation to Sarah), and continued with John, in which he ignored multiple people and boundaries because he was desperate for companionship. Here, with Martha, he is actually bringing death upon his patient.

After Martha's death, David finds a new patient, an adolescent boy, who he will only care for while his mother is out of town. While at the park, he attempts to interact with the boy by initiating conversation, to which the response is "Fuck off." In this instance, his life's meaning is called into question; here is a patient who has no interest in David, does not want to speak with or interact with him in any way, certainly does not depend on him emotionally, and who will no longer be his patient in a few short days. There is no shared bond here, nor is there the promise of one in the future. In the next scene, Franco returns to the act of running. Finally we see David running outside, in the real world, down the street. In this instance, he makes literal, physical progression as he runs through the neighborhood, moving through the world and taking actual steps, rather than running in place on the treadmill. At the final moment, he crosses an intersection in front of a car. There is a crash, some noise, and then the screen goes black. We

can only imagine that he is dead, given the impact and the sounds that we hear. Because he wasn't living for himself, but rather gaining self-gratification through caring for his patients, it is fitting that such a violent character will now have to die himself, also in a violent way. The patient who last needed him has died, and the one he was next assigned does not, and will not, care for him. Now, David truly has nothing to live for and so must die.

### **Conclusion**

Franco further uses space to allude to the violence that he explores. Not only are his films typically set in violent places, the violence permeates these diegetic spaces so that at the micro level, it becomes clear as well. Thus, he creates a sort of dichotomy of violence, first by setting the films in spaces that are known to be violent on a very subjective level, wherein the quiet norm is disturbed by physical disruptions. As we get deeper into the narratives, we see that the seemingly polished private spaces are very violent on the micro level as well, and it is there the objective violence seeps out, bringing to light the violence inherent to all of his work. Given that his films explore universal themes, Franco's oeuvre highlights the violence inherent to human nature, while also at times insinuating that his spectators participate in it.

## Chapter 4

### Trauma, Gender Violence, and the Complicity of the Spectator

In the following pages, I attempt a broad analysis of Franco's first two films based on the themes of gender, violence, and spectatorship. I argue that Franco's films play out the relationship between trauma and gender development, engaging the question of how gender types and expectations may interact with theories of trauma and recovery. In my readings, I use the theoretical framework built by Cathy Caruth and Shoshanna Felman, where trauma theory is concerned, and the socio-structural theory of masculinity posed by R.W. Connell, which I argue is an important measure of subjectivity in Franco's films. In a separate but not disconnected trajectory to this argument, I further pose that the director's films explore the ethical relationship between the spectator, spectatorship, and the production and consumption of mediatic violence. I discuss Franco's emphasis on this modern-day violence in Mexico, and his insistence on the audience's complicity in this violence, through his exposition of universal problems that are also inherent to the particular sociocultural context as a result of a dominant hegemonic masculinity, which his films achieve by employing specific camera angles and positioning with the *mise en scène*, which encourage the participation of an active viewer rather than a passive spectator. Mabel Salinas' review of *Después de Lucía*, discussed as a "drama of venganzas," because Ale's father must avenge his missing daughter, also mentions that the film is a "retrato abrumadoramente duro que no permitirá al espectador permanecer impávido," and this act of revenge is derived from the same masculine hegemony that rules *Daniel y Ana* as well.

While considering the impact of trauma as it affects the individual, Caruth and Felman's explorations of how we overcome traumatic experiences are crucial to our understanding of

Franco's characters in each of his films. Recognizing that trauma is something that affects the individual after the fact, Caruth describes survivors as "possessed" by their experience, mentioning that "to be traumatized is...to be possessed by an image or event" (5). Thus, that which Daniel, Ana, Alejandra, and Franco's other characters experience is something that takes over their ability to be in the world, and thus his films explore their recuperation process after such an experience. In examining the events that these films explore, we come to understand trauma as a negative experience that takes the form of possession over its survivors. Franco's characters, in turn, are 'possessed' by their lived traumatic experiences, and thus inhabit a liminal space in these films, straddling their survival of the event with the struggle to recuperate. Felman's discussion of trauma as that which forces its survivors to "witness" the negativity that has affected them also comes into play; these characters' inability to respond leads to their regression psychologically.<sup>12</sup>

While both of these films put emphasis on this 'macho' stereotype as the result of much of the perpetuated violence, each film addresses the relationship between violence and hegemonic gender types in divergent ways. *Daniel y Ana* discusses violence as the result of a lived traumatic experience by the title characters, while for Alejandra in *Después de Lucía*, violence against women is excusable based on a negative reaction to a female social transgression. Both conjugations of gender-violence are, however, inextricably linked to what the masculine establishes as hegemonic. While *Daniel y Ana* provides us with much potential for a critical and theoretical undertaking, I find it useful to begin with his second work, viewing his first film through themes discussed in the latter, given that it was this film which earned him international acclaim.

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<sup>12</sup> Both Caruth's and Felman's theories will be explored at a deeper level later in the chapter.

Each film discusses characters in the face of abject trauma and violence, with an emphasis placed on their self-presentation after the initial experience. As discussed previously in Chapter 3, *Después de Lucía* is centered on Alejandra and Roberto, an only child and her father, who just lost Lucía, their mother and wife respectively. The film explores Alejandra's process of becoming after the loss of her mother and in conjunction with her relocation to Mexico City from her childhood home in Puerto Vallarta. Cultural and social norms inform her behavior both at home, where she takes on her late mother's role as 'woman of the house,' and at a posh private school in Polanco, where very moneyed, popular students befriend her. Unfortunately, a lack of complete understanding of social etiquette unbeknownst to her leads to a transgression for which her new friends punish her. In this portion of the paper I will be examining the gender expression of Alejandra through ideas posed by Judith Butler and Robert McKee Irwin. Within this broader framework, I am more interested in examining this character's development through recent sociological studies on contemporary phenomena, such as sexting among adolescents, which this film holds front and center. After Alejandra's social transgression, the group, mostly the other girls, use humor to self-affirm, while also to convince the rest of the student body to turn on Ale.

### **On Sexting and its Aftermath**

Franco's film begins with Ale's father, Roberto, at a mechanic picking up a car after it has been repaired. We don't see Alejandra until several minutes into the film, with a shot of her at the beach in Puerto Vallarta, before the big move. At this point in time, her identity is unbeknownst to us; we see a young woman at the beach in a bikini, a long take from a distance. We see her swimming and climbing on rocks while in her bathing suit; from the start, we cannot see her face or tell her age, but it is important to note that Franco's film opens with Alejandra as a sexuated figure. Thus from the beginning of the film, Alejandra's sensuality is noted, though

she is not objectified per se. The audile-tactile nature of the water in this scene is reflective of the hapticity of the aqueous, a Deleuzian vector for the libidinous or the erotic in Latin American cinema.<sup>13</sup> As the camera moves nearer, a close-up shows Alejandra in a much more personal light. Situated behind her, all we can see is the back of her head. However, her long hair and elegant curls once again evoke femininity, and her eyelashes, covered in mascara, draw attention to the sensualization of her onscreen body. A dark purple hoop, however, pierced through the cartilage of her right ear, reveals her adolescence; Alejandra is a teen girl concerned with her outward appearance and the current trends. In all, her appearance and the mise-en-scène reveal that we are observing a young adult.

Though Lucía's death isn't mentioned until later in the film, it is clear from the beginning that Alejandra and Roberto are alone. Because of this, Ale's role often changes between 'daughter' and 'woman of the house.' Though her appearance changes with this switch, Franco also makes it clear through her positioning and the mise en scène. At times, we view the film from Alejandra's point of view, in many cases while Roberto is driving. Seated from behind, Alejandra's, and our, spot in the backseat represents her as the child in the situation. However, occasionally we take the passenger seat, and Alejandra speaks to her father in a maternal, womanly way. She urges him to have a snack and forces chocolate into his hands; at their new space in Mexico City, she talks about finding a more permanent home while bringing Roberto his pajamas. She helps him with the minutiae of day-to-day life, even encouraging him to find work when one job falls through. These moments not only highlight her maturity, but also often make her appear as more of an adult than her father, which in turn highlights Roberto's powerlessness in dealing with the untimely demise of his spouse in an automobile accident.

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<sup>13</sup> See Venkatesh's reading of Javier Fuentes-León's *Contracorriente*.

Thus, Franco's film begins with an adolescent girl who behaves more as an adult than as a child, with her father providing a foil for her maturity by his showing lack of control. Throughout the film, Roberto's inability to conform to societal expectations gets him into trouble; he throws a tantrum at work and quits his job in a moment of anger, and even resorts to violence in one scene, in which a bout of road rage causes him to leave his vehicle and engage in fisticuffs with another driver. Oftentimes, these displays recall the stereotyped Mexican 'macho'<sup>14</sup> attitude that permeates what Traci Roberts-Camps calls "a patriarchal society that celebrates hyper-masculinity and male sexuality" (149). The macho figure is a local expression of Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity, which is defined as the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees...the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Though Roberto is the only adult in Alejandra's life it becomes clear that his actions often place him at a subservient role to Ale's growing domestic maturity, especially when he is unable to comply with the expectations of the hegemony.

Alejandra's transition to her new school appears to be easy. She meets a new boy named José and is taken in by his group of friends. During lunch with the others, it becomes clear that humor is used among members of the pack to deny or accept different persons. For example, a husky boy in the group is given the nickname 'El Gordito,' and ridiculed for his eating habits. While it appears to be all in good fun, this functions as a way to affirm the power of the group's more popular members. The nickname shows us that 'El Gordito' is the group's clown; a dispensable person kept around for the jokes, but not necessarily a true friend. Dana Klein and

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<sup>14</sup> In this case, the 'macho' masculinity referred to is one defined by a local hegemonic masculinity in Roberto's Mexico City, rather than the notable "machismo" seen in Latin American texts as well. Given Roberto's chosen profession and his tenderness towards his daughter, in this thesis I view him as 'macho' rather than 'machista.'

Nicolas Kuiper affirm that humor functions as such in many social groups as a way to strike a desired social balance, saying “aggressive humor may often be used against peer-victimized children, as one means of maintaining their lowered status within the peer group...thereby maintaining group solidarity.” The detail about El Gordito, while superfluous now, will be important in the conclusion of the film; perhaps more important, though, is the culture centered around verbal abuse that this character exemplifies.

In a subsequent scene, Ale attends a party with her new friends where they spend time in the jacuzzi. Later on, she and José move from the jacuzzi to the bathroom where they have a flirtation. While he tries to seduce her, Ale views herself in the bathroom mirror. We see her on the right side of the screen, looking feminine and sexually attractive, older than her peers, like the popular girls who have recently befriended her. A second bikini, this one more revealing, shows off her figure once again. When she sees her image, her eyes are dark and serious, in a gesture of self-contemplation ritualized in front of the reflective surface. We see that Alejandra is experimenting with her sexuality, probably for the first time, having entered the age of discovery that is her adolescence. This close-up of Alejandra viewing herself in the mirror as others see her, as she would like to be seen, is reminiscent of the Lacanian mirror stage. The self-reflecting gaze shows Ale looking at herself, imagining herself to be mature, feminine, and sexy, though the ruse is clear to the audience, who can tell that she’s still an adolescent and very much in a stage of exploration; this image of the Lacanian *meconnaissance*, or mis-recognition, shows Alejandra projecting how she would like to be seen on her very own reflection. As she turns around to kiss José, the camera pans out so that we can see his hands as he begins using his cell phone to record the encounter, her mis-recognition left in an unresolved *mise-en-abyme* that is captured by the camera within the diegesis.

Back at school, the video circulates amongst her peers, and insults spread like wildfire, with Alejandra falling victim to several inappropriate text messages from other boys in her class. For José, these are “todas tonterías,” but we see that the first day of school after the party, (which Ale chooses to take off, presumably out of embarrassment), her female friends are scandalized. While José is lauded for his performance, Alejandra is informed that ‘no one’ has sex the first time they ‘hook up’ with someone. We can assume that this isn’t actually the case, but rather that Alejandra is in trouble because ‘no one’ has sex the first time they hook up with someone *only to have it become public knowledge*. Clearly, Alejandra has unwittingly broken social code, and for that she is accused of misconduct. This double standard doesn’t apply to José, who simply has to put up with these “tonterías” for a short period time, while simultaneously enjoying a heightened reputation among his male peers, due to the reigning hegemon which places him in a position of power as a reward for proving his sexual prowess.

While sexting is traditionally connected to the exchange of nude photos through high school adolescents, the problem itself has mutated given technological advances. Although Franco’s film features a video (akin to a sex tape), the narrative discusses the same double standard as connected to gender through this theme. Research by Jessica Ringrose into the exchange of nude photos in high schools shows us the prevalence of this double standard in multiple cultures. Through interviews with teens in the United Kingdom, Ringrose confirms that according to social code, while the release of these photos has the power to destroy a female student’s reputation, the reputations of male students with photos in their possession are heightened (308). The idea is that the male students were able to convince the girls to send photos; with *Después de Lucía*, it’s a matter of hegemonic masculinity, and the necessity for the male students to prove their adherence to the type through sexual domination. In this research,

Ringrose poses that though “such sexual double standards are hardly new, the technology provides new ways for value to circulate through images, and for value to become materially marked on particular bodies as part of that process” (317). This explains the culture of sexuality among adolescents in conjunction with technology, which provides male students with another form of sexual control. In *Mexican Masculinities*, Robert McKee Irwin notes that masculinity “is not internal” but rather “it is determined more by the judgments of others than by an intrinsic quality” (xviii). So, regardless of José’s appearance as smaller, baby-faced, and lanky, all signs that he is still going through puberty, the fact that his tryst with Alejandra goes public is what matters. If the other males in his pack see him as on top, then ultimately he gains standing in the gendered social hierarchy.

The morning after the incident, we see a marked change in how Alejandra outwardly expresses her sexuality. As she eats breakfast with her father, in pajamas and without makeup, she looks like a little girl. Being fed by her father assists with this image, making her appear much younger than she actually is. During the meal, she receives a text message that reads, “Hola PUTA.” We continue to hear multiple vibrations from her cell phone; although she chooses to ignore them, we can only imagine that they are filled with more insults and abusive words. Her appearance changes her first day back at school as well; her pants are slouchy, her sweatshirt too big, and her hair up. It’s clear that she is actively trying to avoid being seen – to sartorially desexualize herself – whereas before, she played up her femininity. This change in personal appearance coincides with the circulation of the video, and is marked by her relationship with José. In the same way the film’s title provides a sense of ‘Before’ and ‘After’ Lucía, the expression of Ale’s sexuality and femininity can be marked in terms of ‘Before the video’ and ‘After the video.’

However, it is of note that at home, with her father, Ale still tries to assume her mother's role; she wears Lucía's dress around the house, and receives her father's approval. Franco includes this to highlight the fact that Alejandra is trying to appear more mature in the face of disgrace at school. In line with Judith Butler's seminal understanding of gender performance, we can see that Alejandra is trying to manipulate her image by code switching. At first, being feminine meant sex appeal and attention from boys. Now, she is performing the most traditional of roles assigned to her gender. Though she's been 'typecast' because of her gender at school, put into one category (the 'disgraced woman' or 'whore'), at home she is trying to fulfill the ultimate role assigned to her gender, that of mother or wife. Thus, she moves from the sexual domain of the public to the house, in search of domestic femininity and respect.

Bearing in mind that the water codes for the erotic in Latin American cinema, it proves useful to examine Alejandra's return to it during this traumatic period. At school, she dresses unremarkably. At home, she begins performing the role of her mother, as woman of the house. In both cases, she doesn't appear sexual at all, but rather as asexual or, in the case of the mother, perhaps post-sexual, because she is mimicking the behavior of a woman past the point in her life of flirtations and dating, and skipping to the stage of marital establishment and the maternal. Around this time, we see Ale go for swims at the local pool. With a nondescript black bathing suit, goggles, and her hair up in a swim cap, her image appears in stark contrast to the consciously sexualized body that appears early on by the shore. These scenes – that of her swimming and those in the school and the house – occur within the same five-minute period. In other words, her outward appearance (as mediated by clothing and her interaction with other gendered bodies) undergoes a transformation, perhaps best exemplified by the images of her desexualized body coming into contact with the aqueous as she swims laps.

Though Alejandra tones down her appearance at school, and seems to re-gain acceptance from her friends, everything takes a turn for the worse after continued communication with José. It is then that the violence starts, apparently because she is still involved with the boy that Camila had already claimed. Because of her supposed relationship with José, Camila and another friend lure Ale to their house to get ready for a school dance. After convincing her to try on a nearly transparent dress, they pull her out into the room, put her in a pair of high heels, smear garish lipstick on her face, and hold her down, all the while calling her a whore and accusing her of committing various sexual acts with José. We see Camila wielding a pair of scissors, and then Franco (literally and metaphorically) cuts the scene, a gesture which foreshadows the next marked change in her appearance through the cut, of both the scissors and the filmed space.

The violence here is in direct response to Alejandra's social transgression, and the fact that she 'ignored' the supposed pre-existing relationship between Camila and José. Upon getting home, dressed up like a whore and beaten by her friends, we see Ale look at her reflection; this shot mirrors that in the bathroom during her tryst with José. Situated on the left-hand side of the screen this time, without makeup or hair, (this is where we finally learn what the scissors were for), she looks like a child, completely pre-sexual. Although she's dressed with the performative accouterments of the whore, as defined by the female homosocial, it's as if this just highlights the fact that she's still a child, and has been playing 'dress up' all along. Here is where the true *meconnaissance*, or mis-recognition, is revealed; Alejandra is forced to confront the fact that who she saw in the mirror before, a self-actualized, sexy young woman, was a figment of her imagination, the person she was trying to be at a new school in an attempt to move on from her mother's recent death. What she imagined she could be is not how she was perceived to be. After the haircut, we see a definite regression, rather than confusion. Without her hair, looking at

herself in the mirror, in a parallel and reverse shot to the earlier sex scene, she looks as if she has no conscious knowledge of her own sexual nature, or what role she is to now perform within the broader group.

Her father Roberto seems to be stuck in this same diegetic space, as he is never shown in a true state of control, but rather seen acting outside of the stereotypical masculine role, unable to express his masculinity as it is traditionally expected to present, presumably because he has not moved past Lucía's death. Oftentimes, his emotional outbursts are associated with weakness and powerlessness. After she's already run away and is supposedly dead, Roberto resorts to kidnapping, and subsequently killing, José after El Gordito, another character marginalized by the reigning hegemon, exposes him for distributing the tape. While Roberto mans the boat, we finally see his face, which up until now has been hidden as he drives, signifying his re-subjectification within the masculine hierarchy through his exertion of physical power. By regaining control, Roberto returns to the roots of this hyper-masculine, traditionally Mexican type, to counteract the violence against and supposed loss of his daughter. The two protagonists therefore return to gender extremes in order to resolve their individual relationships with trauma, both that of losing Lucía and of the sexting transgression: Ale attempts to regain her reputation by portraying the mature, domestic, post-sexual woman, thereby removing all aspects of the sexual from her gendered appearance, while Roberto resorts to the stereotypical violence associated with the Mexican 'macho.'

### **Traumatic affronts to masculine engagement in *Daniel y Ana***

*Daniel y Ana* demonstrates the reaction to sexual abuse by its two title characters that are also siblings. After being abducted while driving in Mexico City, Daniel and Ana are forced to

have sex with each other on camera, and their recorded IDs serve as potential fodder for blackmail from that point on. With the understanding of “repressed violence to be the basis of both individual and group identity” (Meek, 3), Daniel and Ana’s experience of this visceral sexual violence – and the transgression of the incest taboo – is compounded by further traumatic events, and societal expectations, as well as a clear lack of control in their everyday lives. As noted by Daniel Krauze, Daniel doesn’t have “las herramientas para comprenderlo [the trauma]” and his “impulsos y deseos...se enloquecen.” This reaction is a direct result of living in a society ruled by masculinity. As in *Después de Lucia*, the title characters, though more in Daniel’s case, react to extreme sexual trauma by undergoing a series of transformations that ultimately re-signify their performances within a gendered hierarchy.

As an adolescent, closer to high school and college rather than full-fledged adulthood, Daniel’s response is to regress, functioning more like a child than someone on the cusp of manhood. Much of the film, in fact, chronicles the varied steps that he must undertake in reaching the “moment of engagement,” or what Connell terms as “the moment at which the boy takes up the project of hegemonic masculinity as his own” (122). In the case of Daniel, the filmed incest scene marks a point of trauma, or an *Antes* and *Después* that results in his regression from the expectations of masculinity. Daniel’s regression is one directly related to his lived traumatic experience, as it has emasculated him and thus complicated his engagement with the moment of becoming; he cannot prove his masculinity (as he is expected to perform it) after being humiliated as he has. Ana, on the other hand, clearly already an established adult, vainly attempts to continue with her societal and gendered trajectory, though it is important to note that Daniel’s regression impedes her as she progresses. From the beginning of the film, Daniel’s lack of power and control is established, while Ana as his confident and capable older sister, seems to

emasculate him unknowingly, or without any deliberately intended malice. After the trauma, it becomes clear that both characters are unsure of how to proceed, but familial and societal expectations inform their trajectories, without necessarily providing real solutions.

As in *Después de Lucía*, driving, as an action and as a metaphor, and the space of the automobile, is important in the construction of masculine identities. Daniel rides in the back of his parents' car like a child, while they follow Ana and Rafa, who drive in a separate car. Thus, Daniel is doubly infantilized; he is shown in the role of the child, subjected to his parents' authority, while simultaneously being led by his (more dominant) sister. At many points, the car shows a marked position of weakness on the part of the characters, similarly to how it functions in *Después de Lucía*, and so we come to see the vehicle as a troubled space in Franco's films, beginning with the abduction of Daniel and his sister. Given that they are held at gunpoint while in Daniel's car, this space, and their geographic location on this particular stretch of road, immediately becomes the scene of the crime, and the root of their trauma in this particular film.

In several instances after the abduction, we see that Daniel is unable to continue driving after a certain geographical point, presumably the location of the abduction (though it is filmed from multiple angles and we, as the audience, are never really privy to the actual coordinates of the origin of trauma in the film). We see him attempt to drive past this spot, and then he stops. He tries again, at one point finally exiting the vehicle entirely, leaving us sitting in the passenger seat to watch him walk away. The film opens with Daniel being driven, finally shows him driving only to be forcibly removed from his own car, and then in multiple instances after the initial trauma, unable to move on. He develops a habit of driving partway to his destinations, exiting, and continuing by cab. The multiple scenes showing Daniel being driven somewhere and being kissed goodbye by his parents also highlight this inability to cope with the moment of

trauma, given that they show a distinct control over Daniel wielded by other characters. His lack of control is only exacerbated by the video he is forced to make with his sister; as a relatively complacent character before the video, after the video he seems to have no self-autonomy whatsoever. In a way, we can view Daniel and Ana in terms of “before the video” and “after the video” the same way that Alejandra’s social trajectory in *Después de Lucía* is marked by her participation in (and subsequent distribution of) a video as well.

Daniel’s manhood is also gauged by his marathon training, which he and Ana undertake together. In understanding Connell’s discussion of the moment of engagement as a young man’s first, voluntary participation in masculine hegemony we see this marathon training as part of Daniel’s active perpetuation of this system. The marathon is a way for him to prove his virility and physical power. Before the trauma, we observe him and his sister running together. All the while, Ana is faster and more technical, correcting Daniel’s technique, giving him tips about how to lift his knees. Her stamina is noted when she outruns him. Given that this marathon can be viewed as a test of his endurance, and the physical exertion as associated with the virile, physical ‘macho’ stereotype, Franco’s film highlights Daniel’s lack of ability to complete and adhere to the dominant type. After the abduction, we see Daniel walking, not running, and on a treadmill. Not only has he moved from outside, a realm devoted to physical activity, to working out inside his parents’ home (as does Ale moving from the beach to the pool), he also isn’t even running. He’s physically regressed due to the trauma. The fact that he’s on a treadmill is a further sign of the powerlessness that the trauma has caused, given that he is no longer self-motivated, but rather being physically propelled, at a much slower pace no less, by a machine.

During the abduction scene, Ana and Daniel are driving together in his car, with Daniel behind the wheel, taking directions from his sister. The audience is positioned in the backseat,

immobile, along for the ride. As they are stopped at a light, Daniel is approached from his window and held at gunpoint, while an unseen abductor holds another gun to Ana. Upon being held at gunpoint, Daniel is too scared to act or do what he is told. Thus, while Ana remains calm and collected, following every order and physically taking action, (though at another person's behest), Daniel's powerlessness is emphasized as he is unable to act at all. Though at this point we don't know where the two are being taken, this scene in the car foreshadows what is to come: complete control over Daniel, a nakedness and lack of power that cannot be avoided in the face of conflict. It is important to note that as the abductors take control of the vehicle, Daniel and Ana are forced to ride in the trunk, while the spectators remain in the backseat. From this point onward, the film forwards two important ethical positions. First, it is suggested that we are fully complicit in the goings-on of the abductors through our physical placement (through the lens) within the car and not the trunk. Second, and somewhat tangentially, we are able to identify with Daniel, because we too at this point are along for the ride, forced into passive subservience, our autonomy vis-à-vis violence dictated by forces beyond our control, as we are taken to an unknown location where the filming will take place.

After arriving at their abductors' destination, Daniel and Ana remain blindfolded, waiting for their next instruction while sitting on a couch. It's important to note here that the viewer is not positioned in a way that allows them to orient themselves with the victims, but rather is set up as an aggressor, placed perpendicularly in a series of shots to the victims. Multiple long takes of medium range position the spectator in line with the abductors, staring at the victims head-on while waiting for them to react in some way. Even when they are delivered to the house, the spectator lingers after they get out of the trunk and head inside, as if we are instructing them in, and waiting for our accomplices. Riding in the back with the accomplices while Daniel and Ana

are put in the trunk immediately places the viewer in the aggressors' camp. Lingering outside, we are still meant to identify with them.

In her study of torture, Elaine Scarry notes that all parts of the 'production room,' (here referring both to where Daniel and Ana are filmed, as well as rooms where acts of torture are conducted generally) "are converted into weapons" (40). Thus, the loss of corporeal control experienced by Daniel and Ana is expressed physically through their environment, which Franco uses to emphasize their nakedness and powerlessness in the face of abject horror. In many cases of torture, household objects are used as literal weapons, removing all connotations of the domicile in order to psychologically, as well as physically, harm the victim (Scarry 40). In the case of Daniel and Ana, this can apply to the bedroom where they are forced to copulate, in that "[t]he domestic act of protecting becomes an act of hurting and in hurting, the object becomes what it is not, an expression of individual contraction" (41). If we consider the bedroom to be "the object," then we can see how the domicile, a domestic space meant to provide safety and comfort to the individual in question, is manipulated by violence, that very comfort being removed and replaced by abuse, where the subject's control of their body is taken away from them. Franco effectively uses space as an important signifier in his fashioning of trauma within the narrative of both films, as the bedroom, car, or even the swimming pool become important sites of coping with violence.

Daniel and Ana's IDs are held up to the camera prior to filming, ensuring the producers' security of potential blackmail material. A head-on medium shot throughout filming allows the spectator to view the copulation as if they were filming the encounter personally. In this way, Franco ensures active complicity on the part of the spectator at the most intense moment; not only are we part of the violence and rape, but it is insinuated that we are actively filming it

ourselves. A long take mimics the filmmaker's passive, observant eye, completely consumed by the image in front of it. The shot itself is passive, allowing for visual consumption. However, the placement of the spectator perverts this notion of passive consumption; by making the spectator's position equivalent to the filmmaker's, Franco shows us that passive consumption and creation, production, and distribution of this violence are one and the same.

In *Daniel y Ana*, we see how perversion of the bedroom causes Ana to reconsider her upcoming nuptials, depressing her to the point of exhaustion, resulting in her inability to do anything but stay in bed, perpetuating a vicious cycle enacted by the violence created in and by the room itself. Her world is reduced to the same space where her world was upturned to begin with. Albeit different rooms and different beds, the lived traumatic experience effectively ruins all bedrooms from this point on, providing the catalyst for a depression that confines her to her own bedroom at home, trapping her in what was once a safe space, while simultaneously serving as the ultimate reminder of what has happened.

After the rape (which is a mutual rape, as both are forced into non-consensual sex by the unseen abductors), then, it stands to reason that a character previously depicted as struggling with the tenets of masculinity comes to have even less control in his life. We see multiple examples of this further emasculation, through Daniel's regression in marathon training from running to walking, and his inability to drive past the spot where the abduction presumably took place. This emphasis on the car as a troubled space continues to be reflected by the constant placement of Daniel in the backseat, emphasizing an unknown trajectory over which he has no control. A very pointed example of Daniel's lack of control comes from a dark moment in his room. The camera is positioned behind his head, once again serving to put the viewer in the place of the complicit voyeur. We are forced to sit behind him and watch as he looks up both he

and his sister's names, along with "video" into a search engine, trying to find the damning footage that included shots of his ID. In other words, the film develops through a series of montages the tension that is generated by the traumatic moment in the process of engagement.

After pointlessly searching for the video online, hidden within the confines and shadows of his bedroom, Daniel is interrupted by Ana walking in, inviting him to see a therapist with her. Immediately after this scene, we see Daniel driving (presumably) to school, abandoning his car, and playing hooky. He eventually ends up in the psychotherapist's office, but storms out after being told, "[p]uedes hablar libremente." It is important to note that this is where Daniel finds the experience to be more than he can bear, given that he is finally being asked to talk about feelings that society does not allow him to have. The scene develops the responsibility of the witness that Felman explores; "to bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude" (3). Thus, not only is Daniel incapable of speaking about his trauma or bearing witness to his interrupted moment of engagement, but in not speaking he is not allowed to take responsibility for the traumatic events that have happened to him, especially in that as a witness, the sole witness of his personal trauma, the burden he must bear is, in part, the ability to make others (who are part of this sociocultural milieu) understand what has happened to him. As an adolescent male directly participating (until the rape) in his moment of engagement, Daniel is unable to bear the responsibility of his lived experience and simultaneously serve as a representative of the hegemonic gender type.

Daniel, in a sense, exemplifies Cathy Caruth's observation that a traumatic event "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it...to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5). Thus, Daniel (and Ana, to an extent) is "possessed" by the mutual rape. Daniel continues to

be admonished by his mother for not speaking, which adds to his portrayal as a sullen teen. In these scenes, Daniel is followed from behind with a tracking shot, which implies that he cannot meet our gaze, one example of his powerlessness, and subsequently, reflective of our complicity in his trauma. After one incident with his mother, Daniel ends up in his bedroom, once again interrupted by Ana, who comes in to say, “[n]o fue tu culpa, fue mala suerte.” This statement, along with the interruption, acts as a further disruptive experience because it brings into the open what Daniel wants to repress. It simultaneously ultimately highlights his lack of power even further, because it admits, out loud, that he had no control of his body or the situation at hand.

However, as we have seen in his relationship with Mariana and as modern psychology informs us, victims of sexual abuse tend to perpetuate their own vicious cycles. Daniel’s response to Ana’s attempt to finally talk about their experience triggers a cycle of violence in the character. The film fades to blackout. When we see Daniel again, he is forcing his way into Ana’s room, where we are observing, waiting, placed with the same complicit and voyeuristic point of view we had in the original production room. A long take from the side of Ana’s bedroom shows Daniel as he barges into her room, the same way we’ve seen her casually walk into his. What follows, as he forces her to have sex with him, is simultaneously a taking back of control, and exacting his revenge. The lighting here is darker, with the emphasis on Daniel, which Franco contrasts with the bright, blinding white light of the production room: this is Daniel in control. The original lighting highlighted Daniel’s nakedness and newness to the experience, making his lack of control unavoidable, while the darkness covering Ana’s face in this scene puts Daniel in control, emphasizing his complete dominance. This new moment of engagement, in which he determines to perpetuate the pre-established system of hegemonic

masculinity, justifies the violence he uses to resolve his lack of, and need for, control.<sup>15</sup> Daniel, then, is less interested in working through his trauma (like Ana) and more in retaking the position promised by the moment of engagement by asserting his dominance once again.

Though at the beginning of the film Ana expressed qualms about moving to Spain with Rafa after the impending marriage, her response to her most recent experienced trauma, the rape by her brother, results in the decision to leave immediately after the wedding. We see her approach Rafa in a medium shot, with our view partially obscured by a wall, this time on the left side of the frame. In a shot that perfectly mirrors that which we experienced while spying on her during her wedding planning, this obscured view visually expresses the figurative elephant in the room. Half of the frame is taken up by this dark, obscure wall, implying once again that we are watching something that we should not see, lurking behind walls to catch these intimate moments, as we have seen Daniel do throughout the film. Ana is choosing to leave Mexico due to the conscious rape by Daniel, and not the moment of trauma that she has attempted to work through by exteriorizing and speaking (with the therapist and Daniel).

These two mirroring shots, that of Ana while shopping and speaking with Rafa, are signatures of Franco's, and perfectly reflect the technique used to express Alejandra's meconnaissance in *Después de Lucía*, which mirror each other as well in the moments of female becoming. Moments of intense self reflection by the characters are also moments of self

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<sup>15</sup> This need to regain control of his body, the same control that was taken without his consent and before he was sexually mature by his own emotional standards reflects social science research in the area. According to multiple studies, “[m]ale abuse survivors’ expectation of abuse or violence in relationships...may translate into a greater willingness to victimize or aggress against their partners” (Briere 54). By the same token, previous victimization heightens abuse survivors’ chances of further, future victimization, which explains Ana’s trajectory. An abused child’s insistence on aggression towards others “is a frequent short-term sequel of various types of maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual molestation, psychological abuse and emotional unavailability” (57).

reflection for viewers; these moments are expressed in such a way visually that this mirroring effect addresses a paradigmatic shift in the plot, as well as elucidating a societal flaw that results in such dramatic changes for the characters and their self-recognition. In Alejandra's case, a newly popular girl looking for a fresh start woefully misrecognizes herself while getting caught up in a fast-paced lifestyle, only to finally see herself as she really is (an adolescent girl who is still maturing, rather than a self-actualized young woman). With Ana, the spectator's complicity is established through the visual representation of the voyeur, to which it becomes clear she will remain subjected unless she escapes their gaze by fleeing to Spain.

We see Daniel attempt to force himself on his girlfriend, though he abruptly stops before following through, and Franco cuts the scene. He is next seen being driven around by his father, like most adolescents. As his father waits in the car, we see Daniel in a knife shop, mulling over a purchase, deciding which to buy. At this point, having seen multiple expressions of his post-traumatic violent behavior, Franco's film takes an even more ominous turn: the spectator has no inkling as to why Daniel would be in this shop, dressed for the wedding, ready to attend the celebration. A cut to the wedding shows several shots of the bride and groom, though intercutting puts all of the emphasis and identification on Daniel. In other words, this event (which would punctuate Ana's official entry into feminine adulthood) is made more about Daniel than his sister or brother-in-law, as his inner turmoil becomes our focus, and Daniel serves as the lens through which we view the party.

We see Daniel in the bathroom with Rafa, ominously approaching his new brother-in-law from behind, as if planning to put the recently bought knife to use. As Rafa unsuspectingly washes and dries his hands, there's a subtle shift as Daniel puts the knife away when Rafa turns around. Daniel's missed his chance to exact the revenge it appears he was planning. Rafa exits

the bathroom, returning to the ballroom to enjoy his party, and Daniel stays behind, presumably to plot further. He enters a stall, standing as if planning to relieve himself, and proceeds to manually stimulate himself as we observe him from behind. This camera angle implies further complicity, in the sense that as we stand behind Daniel, viewing the back of his head and just a sliver of his face in profile, we are standing as if it is our hand that is masturbating him. Franco puts us in the scene as his partner sexually and, potentially, criminally, in that we are complicit in whatever crime he almost committed, and whatever he plans to do afterward. We stimulate him, effectively taking control of his body, in a way that he is able to enjoy sexually, a pleasure that he was previously unable to experience because of the lived trauma. We simultaneously pleasure him and ourselves, waiting for what happens next while also maintaining a physical control that has escaped us until now. Daniel reaches orgasm; ejaculating into the glass he's brought with him, he exits the bathroom.

Daniel finds Rafa at the party once again, making small talk, and hands him the glass, half filled with whatever he was drinking, mixed with his ejaculate. He watches as Rafa drinks from the glass and then leaves. If he is unable to kill him – through a symbolic sexual penetration with the knife – then the only other way to assert his masculinity is to emasculate the usurper to the throne of his sister through humiliation. Daniel's actions thus demonstrate an exaggerated, almost desperate and visceral attempt to resituate himself within the gender hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

Each of these films focuses on the complicity of the spectator, with Franco insinuating that in passive consumption, we are actively participating in violence, in relation to his characters as well as in our daily lives. We can recall the moments where we are silent, such as the party at which we are allowed to linger while Ale is sexually assaulted, or our quiet observation as

Daniel searches for the damning proof that he and his sister were forced to have sex. Franco makes us active perpetrators of violence as well, when we become part of the production team that forces two siblings to copulate. It is of note, here, that Franco actively evokes the presence of the media, when he opens his first film with an allegedly true announcement that many people in Mexico City are forced to have sex on camera after a violent abduction by stating that the film is “[b]asada en hechos reales,” and going on to claim that the narrative follows the true story exactly, the only changes being the victims’ names. Franco bookends his film with another statement: “Cada año miles de niños y adultos son víctimas de pornografía clandestina en México y Latinoamérica.” These statements take the violence of the diegesis and bring it to the real, inhabited world of the spectator, insinuating that though we are passively complicit by watching the film, we are, in fact, complicit in our daily lives. Franco’s statement is not one that insinuates complicity in the production of pornography, but rather that our everyday relationship with violence is one that is de rigueur, in that we are inundated with such images that we actively seek out and enjoy.

This enjoyment of violence through passive complicity is akin to Daniel’s trips to the movies in order to play hooky rather than attending school after his traumatic experience. This passive consumption on his part is a direct reflection of our role as spectators. As we watch *Daniel y Ana* or *Después de Lucía*, we are consuming the image while simultaneously desiring participation in violence. Thus, part of Franco’s larger project is a social commentary on mediatic violence in Mexico, pointing to what we actively see going on and yet tolerate, or further, seek out as a way to enjoy ourselves, fooling ourselves into thinking that we are not part of a greater issue at hand.

## Conclusion

Michel Franco's films constitute a body of work with a purpose to explore violence in a way that demands his spectators come to terms with the stark realities he endeavors to portray on camera. As a filmic auteur, his works are interconnected in their styles, plots, and deeper meanings. His documentary-like style, absent of a score and oftentimes of extensive dialogue in general, allows us to understand the verisimilitude of his works while also simultaneously allowing us to enter his diegetic spaces, in turn requiring us to explore our own positions within the problems his films place front and center. Ultimately, Franco's films relay and expound upon the mediatic relationship between the spectator and the violence enacted on camera, while simultaneously exploring violence at every level. He provides his audience with narratives interconnected in their studies of trauma and development, primarily within the established hegemonies of Mexico City, thus exploring the ways in which the space impedes, and occasionally assists in, his characters' recoveries.

Franco's work comprises the latter half of the revival of Mexican cinema, begun by an older generation of directors who are referred to as the 'Three Amigos;' Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu ushered in the era of 'Nueve cine mexicano.' Michel Franco, along with his contemporaries Amat Escalante, Carlos Reygadas, Fernando Eimbcke, and Alonso Ruizpalacios, are riding on the Amigos' coattails, continuing to breathe life into a genre of cinema that was almost nonexistent in the 1970's and 80's. Although Franco, as well as his contemporaries, has produced a body of work which gives him auteur status, the Three Amigos quickly shot to such fame that they enjoy a more heightened, broader public status. Del Toro's films range from *Pacific Rim* to *Hellboy*, and his most recent Spanish-speaking film, *El Orfanato*, is more related to Spain and the dictatorship. Cuarón started out

making films about Mexico with *Y tu mamá también*, though his collaborations on the Harry Potter franchise and his recent *Gravity* have also changed his career. The same can be said for González Iñárritu, whose critically acclaimed *Amores perros* was very much focused on Mexico City, though he too has branched out, producing Oscar winners such as *Birdman* and *The Revenant*. Enjoying such fame after pleasantly surprising the film world by bringing Mexico more public attention has resulted in these directors' ability to work anywhere, while Franco and his contemporaries are each working on their own respective auteur status while continuing to make distinctly Mexican films.

In order to contextualize Franco's emphasis on Mexico City as the primary diegetic space with which he works, I have attempted to understand its violence in conjunction with the space itself, and its history of violence. "Entre dos" and *A los ojos* are the works that come to mind regarding the hold with which neoliberal policies have distorted the space of Mexico City as a whole, given David Harvey's investigations of the marked changes in life philosophy and thought which are a direct result of such a worldview. The championing of individualistic attitudes, which goes hand-in-hand with neoliberalism, results in the horrors seen in both of these works. The audience's complicity in these events, as passive spectators bent on rapidly consuming these images for their entertainment value, is a question which Franco forces us to grapple with as we cannot look away, and simultaneously cannot intervene.

In conducting research for this thesis project, and simultaneously in recognizing the lack of critical academic interest in these films, I have attempted to read as many film reviews on these works as possible. Part of what proves that Franco is, in fact, an auteur, is that while reading each of these reviews without knowing to which films they pertain, one can speculate that they are describing multiple, if not all, of Franco's works, given his propensity to make us

ask questions, contemplate violence, all the while finding ourselves to be a part of it. This in and of itself is indicative of the pattern required of auteurs; it effectively proves that Franco's style and narrative concerns are intertwined in a way that allows him to impart different stories, though of the same magnitude and themes, to his audiences. He uses this "documentary feel" in order to demonstrate to his audience that the works which they observe are not wholly fiction, but rather based in chilling realities that are both difficult to face and imperative to observe, willing them to effect change outside of the theatre.

One reviewer, speaking of *Después de Lucía*, writes that "the intensity and sobriety of Franco's focus make the story's ugliness inescapable" (Rooney). This statement encapsulates Franco's body of work as a whole; what interests him as a filmmaker is the dark underbelly of a world that those with money and power can happily choose to ignore. This is evident in both "Entre dos" and *A los ojos*, where money is simultaneously the ultimate panacea for some his characters, (Mónica and the unnamed parents of his short film), and the downfall of others, (also Mónica, in a sense, and especially Benjamín and the young boy of "Entre dos"). In *Después de Lucía*, the rich students that torture Alejandra, arguably more responsible for the violence committed against her than José, with whom she has the tryst in the bathroom, do not answer to anyone due to the wealthy status which they enjoy. We are exposed to the lives of his characters and the "quietly devastating" violence that they face through his signature "cold documentarylike [sic] detachment," one that is "radically unsentimental" in its "icy aura of inevitability" (Holden, on *Chronic*). This inevitability simultaneously serves as "a stark reminder of a future most of us would rather not think about," in that at every turn, his films end on a darkly ambiguous note, with little hope for his victims, and no reassurance to his audience that the perpetrators of violence he features will be brought to justice (Holden). His ambiguous style, and especially the

way he closes his films, result in spectators stunned by what they have seen, while also forced to ruminate on the events that have occurred without a specific moral relayed to them by the director.

Franco's explorations of the space in conjunction with neoliberalism imply that his most violent characters are likely to go on perpetuating violence, given their marked privilege in a society that champions the individual's desires over the needs of the collective. In *Después de Lucía*, for instance, the only student who truly ends up paying for the sorrow he has caused Alejandra is José, the boy with whom she has sex and subsequently distributes the recording of their encounter, and he is only punished when Roberto decides to take matters into his own hands. The girls who falsely befriended her and subsequently slut-shame her, provoking both verbal and physical assault, are not even seen at the end of the film. They take part in a group discussion held by the school administrators in the hopes of finding Alejandra, the missing student, but we are not left with a sense of resolution at the institution itself. Alejandra has left for Puerto Vallarta; assuming she is ever found or makes her presence known, the only way for her to escape her bullies at school will be to leave the school entirely.

Franco's work is devoid of a prescribed moral judgment or outright consequences for those of his characters that perpetuate the most violence, thereby forcing his audience to contemplate their outcomes independently, and simultaneously requiring them to discern those outcomes for themselves as his films progress, in that we must make use of our "deductive empathy to interpret" each of his characters emotionally (DeBruge, on *Chronic*). Part of this is due to a deliberate lack of dialogue, and an expository cinematography built on long takes "marked by extended silences and a distinct preference for conveying information via oblique glimpses" (Rooney). Franco asks his audience to contemplate the root causes of violence in a

world that is inherently harmful to its inhabitants, while simultaneously exploring the effects of trauma on the individual, and how this trauma is compounded in the future, given his focus on when it occurs: their becoming. In both *Daniel y Ana* and *Después de Lucía*, as well as *A los ojos* to some extent (given that Benjamín is still alive at the end of the film), we are left wondering how such traumatic experiences will affect these characters in the future. Though the films have ended, we can only imagine the troubles that such characters will face as they attempt to move on.

Thus, Franco's style is one that places complicity on the spectator while simultaneously mimicking the processes of trauma itself, "mak[ing] the viewer feel as if [they] [are] a firsthand witness to the horrific actions taking place on the screen," with a stationary camera "serv[ing] to enhance this witness effect" (Chambless). In thinking back to the studies of Caruth, Felman, and Dori Laub, we consider the experience of trauma as the act of witnessing horror. Franco's characters struggle to serve as their own witnesses and come to grips with what they have faced, while his audience members are also converted into witnesses, "as if the viewer is seeing the events in real time from their seat" (Chambless). His consistent omission of a musical score "prompt[s] [our] emotions further" and leaves us "to interpret the actions of the characters" independently (Chambless). Thus Franco's work seeks to expose his audience to trauma in a manner that is as close to a first-hand experience as possible.

Ultimately, Michel Franco's films "address a profoundly sad reality undermining our cultural sense of well-being," fostering discomfort and unease, forcing us to recognize not only the violence of our world, but in ourselves (Jiménez, on *Daniel y Ana*). Each of his works highlight the rampant violence of his diegetic spaces, primarily Mexico City, while also attempting to do so in as realistic a manner as possible so that we may recognize greater truths

about our world through his art. His auteurship is one devoted to truth-telling, putting on display the most uncomfortable truths about our world that go unnoticed by those who can afford to live blissfully ignorant, and are part of the struggles of daily life for those who cannot. In viewing these films, we are both compelled to recognize the violence that we perpetuate and to change it, though he cannot tell us how.

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