

SEX, SILENCE AND SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION: *BATALLA EN EL CIELO*

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Susana Rotker in *Citizens of Fear* (2002) compares the nation to a body, stating that:

If society can be understood in terms of the human body, in which every individual is a 'member' (head, heart, legs, arms), what slowly emerges is a whole being, a body with its own illnesses, equilibrium, deviations, and abnormalities. (18)

The political corpus that encompassed the modern nation traditionally sought to create citizens of those that resided within its geographic borders, in this manner suturing the national body together. At least in theory citizenship was essentially the performance of a national contract in which each individual was able to perceive her / himself as linked to and participating in a common good or goal. Identifying as a citizen ideally served to subordinate all other identities of the individual (local, gender, familial) to the nation. However, in the present period, this compact has found itself under increasing strain as the viability of the nation as a homogenous corpus is questioned. In this context James Holston argues that: "the nation itself is no longer a successful arbiter of citizenship. As a result, the project of a national society of citizens...appears increasingly exhausted and discredited..." (Holston and Appadurai 2). The growth of social and economic disparities between citizens has become so exacerbated that they are no longer able to subscribe to the idea of a shared civic arena or cultural discourse / identity. Subsequently, the concept of a unified nation has become incrementally more implausible.

According to Emilie Durkheim, social cohesion through social morals fails when the ties between individual and community are truncated. This occurs, on the one hand, when the individual no longer shares the cultural symbols and social rituals of said community. On the other hand, a moral matrix no longer governs the individual's actions when an authority vacuum exists. In accord with the sociologist, social dissolution occurs because traditional social axes (nation, government, religion, labor groups, family) no

longer configure the individual's ambitions and desires. In this manner, socio-moral rules no longer restrict the exploits of the subject through their integration / control by the nation / community. Thus, social norms no longer function nor guide the individual's acts. With the disappearance of a social fabric an anomic state arises in which the lack of a moral ethos brings about destructive actions.

Critics such as Jean Franco have argued that the ideal of a unifying social fabric disappears due to the imposition of neoliberal policies that depend upon the market to create economic opportunities for the people of the nation (Franco 2002). The result in many Latin American countries and beyond is that the disparities between social sectors widens. According to the United Nations Development Programme *Human Development Report* (2005), the gaps that mark the contrasts between social sectors have augmented over the last thirty years. This study highlights that more than eighty percent of the global population finds itself in conditions in which the unequal distribution of goods grows annually. In 1985, Mexico was the second country in Latin America after Chile to implement a neoliberal model of economic reform premised around liberalization, deregulation and privatization. The "reforms" were set into place on the assurance of sustainable growth and improved equity, however the ensuing reality has not fulfilled these promises. Rather what has resulted is a situation in which wealth distribution and income have deteriorated and the labor markets contracted (Pastor 1997). In the introduction to *Citizens of Fear* (2002) Jorge Balán describes the actual state of many urban enclaves in Latin America:

Latin American cities that provide limited and inefficient public services with an obvious bias favoring the middle class - not necessarily the upper-income groups who have always resorted to the private sector for health, education, and security - are also attempting to balance the budget in the face of a fiscal crisis. Public employment, up to one-third of the formally employed work force, is under fire. Subsidized public services, even if essential, are reduced or privatized.... (3)

In this manner, society feels the pressures of these neoliberal processes. The urban space becomes progressively more fragmented, divided and constructed around zones to which access is limited. Stephen Graham and

Marvin Simon in *Splintering Urbanisms* (2001) demonstrate that in the majority of metropolises there exist two urban sectors that are segregated from one another. Between the fortified walls of condominiums and other exclusive communities, individuals have access to water, sewage, electric and communications infrastructure as well as private security and at times medical facilities. At the same time, beyond these secured spaces, the residents face the reality of crumbling or even non-existent infrastructural projects.

Batalla en el cielo (2005), directed by Carlos Reygadas brings into the purview of the viewer what we might argue is a crisis in the space of the megalopolis, more specifically the Ciudad de México. In the most general sense, cities are "specific forms of social organizations and cultural expression, materially rooted in spatially concentrated human settlements" (Susser 367). On the eve of the twenty-first century approximately seventy-eight percent of the population of Latin America lived in urban settings. In *Los rituales del caos* (1995) critic Carlos Mosiváis refers to Mexico City as a "posciudad" or a "postapocalyptic" city.

As indicated by Nestor García Canclini, in the introduction to *Reabrir espacios públicos* (2004), the disappearance of a sense of city implies the dissolution of the moral aspect of the city. According to the Argentine critic: "Si no hay ciudad, todo está permitido: contaminar, asaltar..." (15). In this way, what remains of the public space is a zone where "Dios está ausente, donde lo que queda de familia y del Estado-nación no son suficientes para establecer reglas de convivencia" (15). Canclini signals the anomic state of the contemporary cityscape and attempts to respond to questions concerning how to (re)construct the public space, cultural politics and citizenship within the megalopolis of the twenty-first century in order to (re)occupy this social vacuum. For Canclini it is necessary to propose "intercultural solutions for everyone" (17). *Batalla en el cielo* bridges this same thematic into the purview of the camera, probing the disappearance of these moral focal points and the resulting socio-cultural consequences.

Batalla en el cielo contemplates the violence that emerges from the context of the middle classes, its concomitant processes of social disintegration and how, consequently, violence is transformed into a constant element of Mexico City's daily life. However, this cinematic production does not locate itself within the genre of the "new brutality film," (Gormley 2005)

such as *Amores perros* (Iñárritu 2000) or *City of God* (Meirelles 2002). This is, the violence that is portrayed in *Batalla en el cielo* does not exoticify street kids, the poor, or other individuals that inhabit the marginal spaces of the city. Nor does it offer the delinquent as the scapegoat for social ills (Franco 2002). Rather, *Batalla en el cielo* thematizes the violence that afflicts the lower middle class subject, her / his experience of anomie (Durkheim 1897), and the resultant detrimental actions that ensue from the aggression and isolation experienced by the subject within the Mexican megalopolis. One might argue that Reygadas' film is a mis-en-scène of Michel de Certeau's statement: "Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive..."(xvii). Certeau signals the ubiquitous nature of the "defensive and residual" within and outside the corpus of the hegemonic nation. In other words, *Batalla en el cielo* highlights the fractures that mark the national body through the portrayal of the individual experience of social paralysis and alienation. In this manner, the film exposes the sutures that once purported to bind the national body, revealing a Frankensteinian social corpus that has never coalesced, and is now decaying in full view (of the camera).

Batalla en el cielo follows the story of Marcos (Marcos Hernández) and Berta (Berta Ruiz), his wife. The narrative begins at the moment of the death of a baby they have kidnapped from their friend Viky (Rosalinda Ramírez) and from whom they are attempting to extort money. The film follows Marcos over the next three days. The first day he picks up his employer's, the general's, daughter Ana (Ana Mushkadiz) from the airport and accompanies her to the brothel where she works. The second day he returns to the bordello, takes Ana to her apartment, where the two have sex and then later accompanies his wife and Viky to a farm on the outskirts of Mexico City. The third day, he kills Ana and then integrates himself into a pilgrimage to the Basilica de Guadalupe.

Batalla en el cielo is bookend by two prominent scenes. One is a fantasy sequence of fellatio between Marcos and Ana; the other is the raising and lowering of the Mexican flag in the Zocalo that occurs daily at six in the morning and at the same hour at night. The cut transition between these two scenes visually joins them and, in this manner, also makes evident the reading of the film as a national allegory.

The opening fellatio fantasy sequence fades-out to black before the establishing shot of the Zocalo fades-in. Soldiers emerge from the darkness of the morning as they march from the National Palace into the Zócalo to raise the Mexican flag. Behind the official formation, we see Marcos in his blue jeans and black security jacket walking alone, following them. The camera accompanies the raising of the flag until the Mexican coat of arms, fills the screen and is elevated above the frame of the shot. The camera then turns to reveal Marcos scurrying off towards the edge of the Zócalo. He responds to his cell phone, hangs-up and stands paralyzed, his body seemingly falling into the blackness that surrounds him. He gazes back and a reverse shot reveals the Mexican flag blowing gently in the wind, its design only faintly distinguishable in the dark.

The camera returns to the Zócalo for the fifth time in the penultimate scene of the film after which it cuts to the final dream sequence. However, unlike the previous instances, the flag is being lowered in daylight. A resounding military drum marks time as the flag descends, the arms of the soldiers slowly gather its colors and crest.

The use of cutaway shots to the Zócalo for the raising and lowering of the flag marks the tempo of the film. However, at the same time, as state above, it also inserts the nation into the narrative. The alienation of Marcos is an allegory for the breakdown of social structures within Mexico and the resultant anomie that individuals are experiencing. Within this context, the individual stands paralyzed in front of a polis that has all but abandoned her / him.

The Zócalo is the symbolic seat of power of the Mexican government. However, in *Batalla en el cielo* this space is virtually empty, occupied almost exclusively by the Mexican flag. In depicting this national space as void of human presence, the film exposes the nation as a simulacra of power, an empty shell that has abandoned those that it governs. The body of the film testifies to the paralysis of the individual within this social system that has attempted to become "solvent / lucrative" and ameliorate the plight of its citizens by looking to the market and neo-liberal policies.

The implementation of neo-liberal policies in many Latin American countries has lead to state apparatuses that look to the market to cure the ailments that affect the national socio-political body. Increasingly infrastructural (such as water, electricity, security) and civic projects that

were, throughout much of the twentieth century the responsibility of the nation-state and therefore stood as symbols of national progress, are being privatized. What has resulted from these policies is a social landscape that is evermore disjointed between those that have access to basic amenities and those that do not.

Analogous to the splintering occurring at the national level; traditional civic structures, such as the family, the local community, etc. that in the past offered individuals a sense of social cohesion are fragmenting and, in some instances, have all but disappeared from the public landscape, abandoned as empty symbols of the past. The disappearance of traditional civic institutions has generated a profound sense of insecurity that has reverberated within both the national and individual body resulting in

uncertainty about the community of allegiance, its form of organization...inclusiveness, ethical foundations, and signifying performances...uncertainty about the priorities of the right and the good... (Holston and Appadurai 2)

Social cohesion fails, as I previously discussed, when the ties of the individual to his or her community are truncated as the result of the loss of shared cultural symbols and social rituals or the existence of an authority vacuum (Durkheim 1893). As such, socio-moral rules cease to govern the actions of the citizen through his or her integration in / control through the community. With the weakening of the social fabric what results is a state of anomie in which the lack of social laws leads to destructive actions (i.e. increase in crime, murders, etc.).

The previously mentioned fellatio scenes that bookend the film in conjunction with the shots of the raising and lowering of the Mexican flag inextricably link the individual body to the national corpus, in a sense inscribing the nation upon the bodies of the protagonists. The opening scene is a close-up of Marcos' face. He stands immobile as the camera tilts, moving slowly down his naked body. The camera stops as it reaches the back of Ana's head slowly tracking in and then rotating around her head. The screen cuts to a reverse shot continuing to track forward. Ana is performing oral sex on Marcos. The screen gradually fills with a close-up of her closed eyes as they open two tears fall. The screen cuts to black.

We return to the opening fellatio scene at the close of the film. Only this time, the camera moves from shot to reverse shot as if we were viewing the scene through the protagonists' eyes. Ana's eyes, however, are open this time. For the first time in the movie Marcos smiles as he stares down at her.... "I love you so, Ana." Ana responds: "I love you too, Marcos."

The opening and closing scenes of the film are dream sequences. , These two scenes are particularly revealing because it is only in an illusory space that Marcos is able to transcend the flesh of Ana and construct an idealized romantic fiction (this is implied in the fact that they smile, look at each other, and exchange vows of love), in effect establishing a social bond with another person. The paralyzed individual body becomes the location of struggle, a desire to reconnect socially. However, this fantasy stands in direct contrast to the actual events that occur. The real relationship between Ana and Marcos is a non-permissible, non-productive relationship. Ana is a "high-class" prostitute. Marcos works for her father and has been her driver since she was a little girl. Only in the dream space after he kills Ana is Marcos able to express his emotional desires and transcend class boundaries.

In terms of cinematography, Carlos Reygadas veers away from rapid editing sequences, relying primarily on long takes shot in a cool blue-green color palette with sparse dialogue. These techniques differ markedly from the video-clip style editing that is currently popular in recent films (i.e. *Amores perros*, *Cidade de Deus*, *Secuestro Express*). Consider for a moment the scene in which Marcos' wife Berta is selling fruit cakes, clocks and an assortment of other items in one of the pedestrian tunnels of Mexico City's subway system. The scene opens, framing Marcos and Berta from the shoulders up. They stare into the distance, Berta glancing upward ever so slightly to attempt to catch Marcos' gaze. The two stand virtually immobile against a blue-gray corrugated wall. In the background, the piercing sound of alarm clocks stands in direct contrast to the silence of the protagonists. Marcos turns slowly to look at his wife only then stating:

- So the baby didn't even cry?
- Just a little scream.
- What a fuck up
- Yeah, too bad about the money
- I'm not talking about that.

- You're right poor Vicky
- The baby died, not its mother. -Understand?
- Yeah.
- Yeah, yeah. You and your "yeahs."

The dialogue hints that something has gone awry, though we are not offered much in the way of details. Their almost expressionless faces and monotone voices do not react to the content of their exchange, paralleling the motionlessness of the camera. The shot lasts for a minute and forty seconds, what seems like an eternity as the acute ringing echoes incessantly in the background, fragmenting the dialogue as if it were a wall dividing the protagonists. At the same time the protracted take accompanied by the acute ringing separates the viewer from the scene, forcing her / him to feel at once attacked by the sounds but paralyzed outside the frames. In many ways this strategy is reminiscent of those employed by vanguard writers such as Macedonio Fernández who chastise the reader imploring: "Do not read so lightly, reader... for now I am not writing anything; get used to it. When I begin again you will notice"(29). The director jolts the viewer from the boredom, the paralysis of the scenes, through the sounds /soundtrack of the film, almost as if to remind him or her to pay attention, though at the same time, distancing the spectator from the plot by refusing her/him any action or movement within the scene.

Through cinematic technique, *Batalla en el cielo* forces the viewer to experience the paralysis of the individual within the city space and in turn within the nation. Reygadas, via the use of long takes does not suture the viewer into the film, but rather denies her / him said illusion by rejecting the possibility "of getting lost in the action." In this manner, the film uncovers what Lacan terms "the Big Other," exposing the subjective fiction that one must "believe in" in order for the illusion of the silver screen to come alive. The filming techniques in *Batalla en el cielo* at the same time reveal that this same fiction is necessary for the nation to function. In other words, the individuals that compose the national corpus must believe in the nation, be sutured into its body.

The subway tunnel scene plays in virtual real-time (realist cinema), zooming-in on Marcos' face only in the last ten seconds before it finally cuts to a pan of the corridor, subsequently following a young boy whose mother

chastises him, school kids, an old man with a catheter, a few business types as they pass by in route to and from the metro. Ultimately, the camera follows Marcos into the metro.

The scene emphasizes the estrangement between individuals, husband and wife, and the breakdown of the familial unit. The limited dialogue between the two reveals a collapse in their ability to form community. There is always an absence, a blind spot between intention, what one wants to say, and realization, what one says. However, in this case, the gap has become so wide that it is unbreachable. As the individuals are unable to communicate, understanding and therefore social cohesion collapses and in turn the individuals are unable to distinguish what is deemed socially correct and ethical. In this framework, Berta understands the deceased baby firstly as a frustrated attempt for financial gain. In other words, the possibility of the acquisition of a few ephemeral status symbols trumps life itself. The lack of acquisition of these goods proves more disappointing than the loss of life. The end of the scene moves us from the metro tunnel into one of the train cars, translating this disconnect from the familial to the public arena

Carlos Monsiváis in *Los rituales del caos* argues that:

In the metro, perennial novelty is the nation that fits into one square meter. In accord with this prodigious hospitality, every car is a biblical metaphor that there is a space for the loner, couples, families, tribes, generations. In the Metro, borders dissolve between one body and another, and in this way everyone is accommodated. (113)

In Reygadas' film the chaotic arena of the metro, however, negates Marcos the possibility of integrating into the space of the train car, in turn metaphorically denying him a space within the nation. When he enters the car, he is pushed, kicked and ultimately blinded (his glasses are knocked off and trampled) by the people that encircle him. He is denied the possibility of integrating as part of the group, the nation. Marcos accepts that his glasses are gone and stands up with a look of resignation. The camera at this point zooms-in on Marcos' face maintaining the frame briefly, and then cutting to a shot of his glasses on the floor bent and broken. With the cut, the viewer

finds Marcos virtually alone in the car except for a young man who sits dancing, lost in the rhythms of his headphones and another boy who stares in through the window of an adjacent car. What is asserted is not the democratic construction of national space as Monsivais proposes the metro to be, but rather the fragmented nature of the social body and the paralysis that the individual experiences within public ambit.

These moments are documented in excruciating detail, bringing into the purview of the camera the alienation of the individual from the national body. The sounds of the city fill the foreground of many scenes, however, rather than injecting the scenes with vitality, these noises only amplify the detachment and lack of community that dominates the urban spaces thematized on the screen. At the same time, silence incrementally predominates as Marcos' estrangement from the social corpus progressively widens and his helplessness deepens.

The physical body of the protagonist as a sight of punishment, or rather the spectacle of the physicality of castigation is reinscribed into the public arena. Micheal Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) discusses how in the modern age there is a shift at the end of the eighteenth century from the public spectacle in which the body of the criminal is reprimanded, tortured and executed to the imposition of a set of rules embodied in the trial and sentencing of the criminal. In other words, in the modern period the body as a site of punishment is hidden within the bowls of the penal system as it takes on an expansive role in both punitive and supervisory roles. This transition implies a shift from the body as a real, physical entity to the "moral soul" of the criminal being the sight of study and supervision.

Reygadas reinscribes the public spectacle of punishment imposed upon the body of the criminal into the contemporary sphere of the nation, indicating the slashes and incisions that afflict the social corpus and the co-existence of the archaic within the modern. In the penultimate scene of *Batalla en el cielo*, Marcus integrates himself into the annual pilgrimage to Basilica de Guadalupe that occurs annually in the City of Mexico. This scene references the historical shift from the pre-modern to the modern epoch. According to Foucault, the use of the mourning veil to cover the face of the criminal was the first step towards the shift away from the public spectacle of punishment. In the film, the veil hides the face of Marcos as he publicly displays the body of the criminal, his body, walking on his knees, shirtless

and wearing the hood, towards the Basilica. This scene signals the expansion of powers that the state has taken on with the transition to modernity. At the same time, the state is also refused the possibility to insert Marcos within the legal system. Rather what is represented is a state mechanism rooted in inefficiency, a system that has failed the common citizen. Paradigmatic of this is the moment in which two younger female police officers stand, staring at Marcos (he is hooded and slowly making his way to the Basilica) while they eat ice cream cones. At the same time that this occurs the police have been dispatched to locate Marcos for the killing of Ana and the baby. He is considered "armed and dangerous," which we learn from the radio scanner announcements though the two officers are oblivious to his status and seem rather to relish in the moment of the spectacle of his self-imposed punishment. The ideals of citizenship that at once held within them the project of Enlightenment ideology are now debunk. In place, what has emerged is a nation that is evermore divided, uneven, in which a contradictory process of both the violation and expansion of citizens' rights characterizes many democracies (Holston 1998).

If, as Rotker has argued, we can understand society in terms of the human body, then the sutures that once bound this Frankensteinian corpus have not only been revealed, but are literally ripping apart. Reygadas' *Batalla en el cielo* relegates the nation as a terrain of socially connected people to the status of myth.

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