Affectivity beyond “Bare Life”: on the Non-Tragic Return of Violence in Latin American Film

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In his essay *Critique of Violence*, written in 1921 when the aftermaths of both World War I and the October Revolution in Russia were strongly resonating among intellectuals in Germany’s Weimar Republic, Walter Benjamin made a far-reaching statement: “The proposition that existence [Dasein] stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life” (Benjamin, 1996: 251; emphasis added). The remark, focused on what would better be translated as “bare life,” stands out for its complexity, especially when discussed in relation to global modernity. On the one hand, it contrasts with the ethical exhaustion of today’s “public consciousness,” within which these questions seem to have been turned into outmoded issues, allegedly having been overwritten by “reality.” Widely prevalent, sometimes unconscious cynicism has it that many humans – as well as “discourses” – endure as best as they can, irrespective of higher values or historical projections. On the other hand, however, several philosophers have been advancing new critical projects in relation to the concept of life, rather than conforming to the out-of-jointness of the world.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore relationships between current debates on violence and ethics, and cinematic imagination as it helps to articulate dimensions of conflict in Latin America. With his singular study *Homo Sacer*, and reinterpreting Benjamin’s almost forgotten remarks on “blosses Leben” (“bare life”), Giorgio Agamben has contributed to an uncommon rethinking of the relationships between religiosity and power. Regarding the notion of the “sacred,” that author has neither followed the precepts of Christian morality, nor of a “scientific mythologeme” based on the French school of sociology and anthropology (see Agamben, 1998: 75, 76). However, if the notion of “bare life” has been resituated deeply within modernity by thinkers such as Arendt, Foucault, Negri, and decisively Agamben, the biopolitical critique of oppressive capitalism’s having become normal and all-pervasive has just begun. Today’s reproduction and dispensation of labor, matter, and life – with both tendencies being fundamentally violent – have become increasingly functional, but not only because
unity and abstraction operate as exclusive mechanisms of a worldwide economic and political domination. Major global strategies and networks of rule – which Negri and Hardt have placed under the rubric of “Empire” – have succeeded in subduing and outsourcing heterogeneity. At the same time, the imperial mechanisms of scaling and control are haunted by movements and images of reterritorialization, since they have become susceptible to vampirization by heterogeneous interests. Culturally speaking, at issue are, once again, modernity’s borders and peripheries. However, for Arendt and Foucault, and even for Agamben, the reterritorializing force of peripheral knowledges and cultures within a dominant global design has remained secondary, if not irrelevant.

Filmic imagination in Latin America can be perceived to have generated affective territories in its own right. As “global localizations” (Bové, 1998: 372) intervening in the worldwide realm of expression and circulation, a remarkable number of films that are produced today in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil, as well as in other countries, call for conceptual discussion. In order to approach vital problems through film, the present study focuses on phenomenological and philosophical questions. Film engages experience and thought by virtue of “affective configurations,” as well as energies. As one of the crucial realms of contemporary culture, it can be understood as a realm of “second nature,” acting through presence and immanence, breaking down modern abstractions and elusions of identity. In addition, film is susceptible to establishing a peculiar relationship to “bare life,” contained in its epistemological propensity. For example, have not the surfaces of innumerable fiction films in the past century provided a “pure form” of the potentiality of violence? Have they not created a ubiquitous forum for making violence and terror visible, omnipresent, and even “possessive” in modern life? Has not film contributed to an imagination and thus to the existence of a non-Heideggerian, “non-authentic,” that is to say “violent,” dimension of Dasein (being-in-the-world)?

Let me start by demarcating film as symbolic formation(s) constituting a wide, i.e., multilayered realm through which experience is translated into features and figures of immanence. At the same time, film calls for a shift regarding our take on immanence: an “anthropological materialism” (Benjamin) becomes necessary, one that looks at life and history through the lenses of image-making. The concept of immanence points toward experience without transcendence, faith without doxa, for example, when immanent ethical differences take the lead over absolute moral dispositions (see Smith, 1998: 252). We are thus returning to Benjamin. An immanent ethical difference can be perceived by consciously addressing the tension between “mere existence” and “just existence.” Yet the difficulty lies in the absence of “just existence” from the plane of conclusive historical categories. Discussing ethical difference requires an exploration of the surfaces of the visible and palpable world – the ways of aesthetic and cultural expression and understanding, in short, the dimensions of that which is dealt with in terms of recognition rather than cognition and logical construction. My study converses with, among others, Deleuze’s reflections on cinema. However, it advances the hypothesis that cinematic culture in Latin America is giving prominence to ethics.
over abstract ontology. A series of questions arises from this. What are the zones in which the Western transcendental apparatus becomes shallow, even as it remains redundantly prone to a dominant concept of reason? How can “bare life” be meaningfully approached beyond either nihilistic perspectives or traditional Christian ethics? What are the conceptually and morally compelling spaces in today’s world where “bare life” – despite an omnipresent domination – avoids representing the “lowest” level of existence, i.e., where there is investment in energies directed against tolerating “much suffering and hold[ing] on to life [zoe] as if it were a kind of serenity [eumenéria, ‘beautiful day’] and a natural sweetness” (cited in Agamben, 1998: 2)?

How can contemporary films coming from Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina contribute to mapping out, or understanding, these “timely” yet drastically “unworldly” spaces, in which life itself is at stake, having become immanently political? Placing Benjamin in this context makes his insights more suggestive than he himself could have foreseen. This refers, in the first place, to his critique of the “dogma” of the “sacredness of life.” Benjamin wrote:

Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, any more than he [my correction] can be said to coincide with any other of his conditions and qualities, including even the uniqueness of his bodily person. However sacred man is (or however sacred that life in him which is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife), there is no sacredness in his condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men. (Benjamin, 1996: 251).

These words call for strategies of translation that help address the historicity of the present by wresting experience away from collapse, or from its leveling by the deceitful powers of blindness, consumption, and exhaustion. In other words, we are concerned with that order of immanence which is related to the aesthetic presence of the image through film. As much as the “affect” seems to have contributed to the numbness that violence in and through film has widely generated, this very notion will now help cut a path through the pervasiveness of violent images and montage.

The topic of the “non-tragic” return of violence in Latin American film is situated within a shift in the perception of reality. Discussions during past decades have made evident that, once the field of experience is addressed beyond or beneath the marks of representation and explanation, interpretive notions are needed that are “impure” and non-deterministic. Concepts are required which are not already part of the answers that analysis is striving for. Existence conceived of as “bare life,” “power,” “affectivity,” “drama,” “melodrama,” “event,” “montage,” “figurality,” or “repertoire” are examples of such indeterminate notions which can help advance the epistemological and aesthetic discussion. Viewed in relation to the global periphery, Latin America, with its incorporation in strategic neoliberal assets and its conversion into wastelands at the same time (Harvey, 2005: 214), “bare life” acquires a new urgency. Its problematization can lead us into more particular, and less abstract, ethical questions than those put forward by Agamben in his vision of a “global” state of exception. Filmic creation in Latin America has been addressing the “worldliness” of the periphery from
local histories of “post-authoritarian” pacification and neoliberal reterritorialization in particularly intense, sometimes existentialist, yet not unreflective ways. New tendencies in cinema in the Southern Cone, Mexico, the Andean countries, and Brazil have depicted and imagined “bare life,” and death, by contrasting them with the geopolitical project of purification.

The Argentine film *Un Ojo Rojo* (2002), directed by Adrián Caetano, is made up of elements of montage which seem conventional, together with an argument that appears to be ordinary at first glance. Yet, common typological takes are of little use once we accept “sensuous elaboration” (Sontag, 1969: 212) as a quality in its own right. The narration starts on the day on which *el Oso* (“the Bear”), a taciturn man in his late thirties, is released from a Buenos Aires jail into which armed robbery and homicide had propelled him seven years earlier. The robbery had occurred on the first birthday of his daughter, Alicia, a coincidence that discredited the man in the eyes of his pretty wife, Natalia, who struggles to make a precarious living in a suburban, lower middle-class neighborhood. Upon the day of *el Oso’s* return, Natalia is living with another man, and 8-year-old Alicia is being raised with the knowledge that her father is a criminal. However, *el Oso* does not accept being treated as an unwelcome intruder; he instead strives to regain his authority as father, and to provide the family (including Natalia’s new partner) with the financial support he thinks he owes them. His economic condition is as precarious as it was before, so his project cannot be carried out without violent means that lead him, once again, into the arena of delinquency. *El Oso*, who now works as a driver, becomes involved in retaliation and murder (*el Turco*, who still owes him big money, is killed for betraying him again), but he manages to get away with it and to provide the family with an impressive sum. Natalia and Alicia’s stepfather can thus pay their debts. After that, *el Oso* walks away and into the dark, following the principle: “A veces, para hacerle bien a la gente que uno quiere, lo mejor es estar lejos” (“At times, in order to do right by the people you love, you have to be far away”).

Caetano is one of the main protagonists of the so-called *nuevo cine argentino*, a movement that has evolved since the second half of the 1990s, originating in independent film and short film productions, and carried forward by a generation of well-schooled filmmakers who came from television or advertising (see Oubiña, 2003: 29). In Argentina, a controversial recovery of the “submerged universe of marginalized people” by contemporary filmmakers came to bear later than in other countries like, for example, Mexico and Colombia. Caetano’s film should be judged against the grain of an interpretive tradition in Argentina which still favors the adherence to “Adornian” high cultural values. Hence, one criterion for evaluating the status of violence lies in the “possibility” (or the deconstruction of the idea of) of tragedy. Oubiña, in his analysis of the film, asserts that the construction of the hero misses the point: “the figure lacks transcendence” and does not display the traits of a “modern”, i.e., properly tragic, hero (ibid., 32). From the balance between lacking “grandeza” (greatness) and “densidad” (density), it is only a small step to dismissing the legitimacy of Caetano’s protagonist: *el Oso* is qualified as being a “simply violent” creature—“*es un lumpen*” (“he’s...
This approach becomes still more problematic when el Oso is denied the status of a “popular hero”: popular agency would be recognized only if it offered a matrix that fits the “educated” sentiment – it would have to become sublime by striving for absolute values of good or evil; otherwise it remains inauthentic.

To mourn the lack of transcendence in the marginal subject has become a most inadequate, although not uncommon argument in ethical discussions. “Tragedy” still marks a powerful watershed that has, for a long time, been in the service of either an aesthetic “purification” of violence or a sublimation of political and social conflicts. As believed by the above-cited critic, el Oso fails to be authentically tragic because his crisis is not a catastrophe translatable into an individual’s drama that could claim for genuine “truth.” El Oso’s condition is not tragically significant in that he does not deserve “true pity.” To say it with Hegelian criteria, his actions (and failures) cannot be measured by the “eternal and inviolable” values that a tragic subject would summon up against itself (Hegel, 1998: 452). Hegel wanted to be overtly clear: “Beggars and rascals cannot inspire us with pity of this kind” (ibid.). In that vein, el Oso’s is, rather, a “sad story,” “a misfortune as such. Such miseries may befall a man . . . merely as a result of the conjuncture of external accidents” (ibid.), not of deeper necessities. Hence, “sad” collisions and “tragic” conflicts are separated by the famous essentializing partition. My study questions “tragedy” as a hegemonic aesthetic category by which the “entirety” of a subject is to be defended under circumstances of violence and death.

Contemporary Latin American films have generated a narrative and visual repertoire with which a “normative concept” of tragedy (Eagleton, 2003: 8) has been widely challenged, although it was sometimes affirmed. Melodramatic narrative and affective strategies, in particular, question a sublime pathos that refers back to God, the law, or other transcendental insignias. Melodrama has subverted good taste and established rules by staging the most incredible and absurd stories whose only promise consists of limitless love, heartbreak, and quotidian negotiations between these two. Film melodrama has engaged an obsessive imagination nurturing the fury and the day-to-day desires of those whose lives have been emptied of the images and hopes for superior justice (see Herlinghaus, 2002: 14). However, to approach cinematic imagination in these present times may require different conceptual frameworks. Films like Un Oso Rojo, together with numerous others such as La Ciénaga (Argentina, 2001), Amores Perros (Mexico, 2000), and La Vendadora de Rosas (Colombia, 1998), to name only a few, introduce a sobriety of experience that also seems to suspend melodramatic empowerment. This tendency was pioneered by the Colombian film Rodrigo D. No futuro by Victor Gaviria (1988). From this moment onward, the appraisal of the affective strategies of these films can enable a specific involvement in the current discussions on ethics and violence, and especially on the problematics of “bare life.”

The role of the hero in Un Oso Rojo is disconcerting. Let us look at two scenes in the film and thus address the affective traits of the visual language. In both scenes, the status of exception with regard to the meaning of life is at issue. Shortly after being released from prison, el Oso overhears in a street conversation that a young,
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Elegant, business type has received a salary advance. El Oso approaches him to ask for ten pesos, to which the haughty character answers: “anda a trabajar” (“get a job”). El Oso violently drags the fellow into his luxurious car to steal all his money. Intensity arises from the emotional abyss between the two men. Whereas el Oso’s posture, behind his aggressive act, is entirely passionless, the rich man bursts into inconsolable weeping. This leads ad absurdum any possibility of individual tragic distinction in the Hegelian sense. The sharp, affective contrast is grounded on common knowledge shared by both men. For the social outsider and the businessman, sheer life is at stake, although from opposite angles. That is to say, they share a strange sense of a contemporary “state of exception” which is pervasive, yet not directly dependent on the positive power of the law, nor on a sovereign decision known as the Schmittian paradigm. This scene points instead toward what looks like an “existentialist” situation, one that reaches beyond the assumptions of the juridical theory of the state. In Argentina’s post-dictatorship, the political state of exception has passed, since “democracy” implies a normalized society. However, this normalized existence in market society has become anachronistic, now that it is contaminated by situations of exception in the space of daily life. Another still more significant scene constructs an encounter between el Oso and his daughter Alicia, leading to a traumatic revelation. The father has taken the 8-year-old girl to a suburban fairground where she climbs on a merry-go-round. The camera is mounted on it, so that every time it goes around, when Alicia travels past the man, she sees him up close, then moving out of angle until he disappears from sight, before circling back, and so forth. El Oso watches his daughter on the carousel from behind a fence. Alicia notices two policemen approaching her father from behind. The girl grows anxious while she is stuck on the moving platform. The father looks toward her in a state of emotional attachment until he “awakens” at the moment when the policemen, from behind, push him against the fence to search him for weapons or drugs. The girl’s stupor is heightened – the carousel keeps moving so she can only turn her head as far to the left or right as possible in order to keep her father in sight. It is there – in the silent relationship between the face of the daughter and that of the father marked by successive reencounter and separation – that the film produces its “argument” by virtue of the “affection-image.”

According to Deleuze, film has reshaped the problematics of affection, especially with visual figurations related to the use of the close-up. The filmic construction of the face (Deleuze, 1996: 96) has made affect apprehensible through visual ecstasies that surpass the immediate coordinates of space and time (see ibid.). Deleuze addresses particular powers of “abstraction” and intensification in their relationship to the film image. Much earlier, Benjamin had already spoken of the “dialectical image.” This experimental notion has served as an indicator as to how the material surfaces of expression can be approached beyond their empirical, i.e., contextual immediacies. That is to say, how can the complexity of experience and even reflection be explored when they are related, not to transcendence but to “immanence”? How does filmic expression help us to conceive the cultural and epistemological sphere that lies between empiricism and transcendentalism? It comes as a necessary surprise that,
through film, affect can be made "specifically" independent of the coordinates of a concrete place. Montage is able to create unique relationships between visual isolations and contextual environments; affect becomes an "entity" by means of image construction. The relationship between el Oso and Alicia can thus be addressed in terms of intensity and empathy, or of "proposition" (ibid., 97). "Proposition" discloses a virtuality that is "not a sensation, a feeling or idea, but the quality of a possible sensation, feeling or idea." Deleuze describes the "affection-image" as distinct from the "action-image": "it is quality or power, it is potentiality considered for itself as expressed" (ibid., 98). Regarding the scene described above, the traumatic "encounter" of father and daughter is, on the one hand, due to the specific circumstances of the situation. At the same time, the particular affect created by the silent communication between the two faces, both depicted as alternating close-ups, is "distinct from every individualized state of things" (ibid.) – it is like a new experience, powerful and transgressive in itself.

The mutual mirroring of the two faces (as close-ups) expresses the "compound affect" of longing for intimate proximity, and of a sudden bewilderment working against the longing. The affection-image gives shape to a double abandonment as proposition: Alicia is abandoned by her father, who is "taken away" from her by the unlimited power that the police force can exert on the man even in a moment of togetherness with his daughter. Secondly, el Oso is abandoned by the existing law. This abandonment rests on the assumption that interventions of the police often go beyond "law-preserving" violence with practices of "law-making" violence (see Benjamin, 1996: 242, 243). The fact that the policemen walk away after searching the man does not diminish the affective state of affairs that, on the contrary, is pushed toward a perception of the virtual omnipresence of the police. An abandonment of the daughter is caused by the exposedness of the father – his being susceptible to discipline by "superior" coercive violence at any time. To use Agamben's definition, the father in Un Oso Rojo has become a "sacred" person. This is the moment in which the "immanent" guilt of el Oso is crystallized by an image of strong affection. The man had not been doing anything wrong – his mere existence, together with his "suspicious" appearance, sufficed to expose him to reprehension. At last, the affection-image gives shape to a double exposedness: in his abandonment to the all-pervasive, ghostly presence of the police, the father is exposed to the eyes of his daughter, which is worse than his being in prison. While el Oso watches his daughter watching him, he is forced to recognize himself as a criminal-in-advance – a kind of "wandering delinquent." In that sense, both father and daughter are taken away from each other, since the father cannot overcome the immanent sacredness that characterizes his condition after having left prison.

Viewed from the standpoint of multiple abandonments, the next step toward el Oso's relapse into criminal action does not make an essential difference: if he is only a "revenant" to life – not being able to assume a normal existence after jail – his transgressing the existing rules constitutes his only "freedom." Oubiña, the critic referred to earlier, is not interested in the affective situation created by the film when
he asserts: "In a country where taking justice into one's own hands has so frequently been the clearest indication of fascism, at very least a heroic character like el Oso should be in doubt" (Oubiña, 2003: 32). The atavism of Caetano's movie points in a different direction, in that it is a historical phenomenon — as is fascism — yet it is subjectified by those who have been biopolitically dispensed by authoritarianism and by "democratic" neoliberalism alike. In the film, the "loss" of the melodramatic option still enables a strategy of empowerment. Once el Oso realizes that his longing for love and harmony has broken down owing to his "immanent criminality," he decides that he can still help Alicia, Natalia, and her new partner get out of destitution and indebtedness. He does so by participating in a robbery and settling scores with old companions, finally being able to contribute big money to Alicia's new family. The final scene shows the compact body of el Oso, seen from behind, framed in a medium-shot, as he walks away from the camera into the darkness of urban nocturnal space. Now it is no longer the face that constitutes the site of the affection-image. Instead, it is the body of the protagonist which has become "pure affect." The nocturnal, empty streets are depicted in such a way that they lose their specificity and become "any space whatever" (see Deleuze, 1986: 97). The affection-image reveals its magic to "abstract" from spatio-temporal coordinates; moreover, it can even abstract from a face or a body. In that sense, the man's body expresses a de-individualized experience, a posture of life at its limit revealing a strange power and affective consistency.

Realistically, el Oso would be dead after the shootouts that he, alone, had with many other men. Yet the film places the man in a virtual space "beyond death," since society has abandoned creatures like him. In conventional terms, two possible solutions would have sufficed. On the one hand, death could have occurred in a way that enabled the tragic distinction of the person, a situation arising, for example, from Alicia's losing her beloved father so dramatically. On the other hand, violent death could have sealed the destiny of a person who did not deserve otherwise. Caetano's film avoids these schemata, both of which are inherent in a long-traditioned, morally and politically affirmative middle-class imagination. Within this tradition, violence and death have represented the abject side of modern life. In other words: violence has occupied its legitimate place within a modern "means−ends dialectics" that has always seemed to be ultimately secured by enlightened law, normative universalism, or regulative Christian morality. When cinematic ethics, however, engage "bare life" as a normalized condition, the problem is not violence as an ultimate, remote possibility, or as a "means" that under certain conditions serves either the attainment or the preservation of the "higher end," nor as a sad occurrence suddenly interrupting into someone's destiny. At issue is existence qua experience under the conditions of life's having been sacrificed to an omnipresent, "virtual" non-existence of the "human condition." Seen from this perspective, an atavistic philosophy resonates in the final scene, as well as within the affective makeup, of the whole film. This posture has corrosive implications for the ways in which modern life has been conceived and dreamed of. Violence is suddenly made visible outside the means−ends dialectics: it has become the central feature of immanence in the life of figures such as Caetano's hero, el Oso Rojo.
The affective arguments set forth by a series of recent films from different Latin American countries can be placed within a similar framework, an observation that allows us to historicize the perception of ethical survival in times of advanced global capitalism and imperial rule. Speaking in narratological terms, at issue is the conscious decision of the outsider-protagonist to move "beyond death" by using the means at his disposal, not for a higher end but for the sake of sheer existence. This is neither a simple question of counter-violence, nor of terrorism, although it could be viewed as an affirmation of nihilist identities (see Žižek, 2002: 40). It has to do with the heroes' active inhabiting of a space of abandonment created by society at the point where no other alternatives can be seized, yet where the creation of "violent events" serves as an act of solidarity — the support of loved ones or family members who still have a chance to outlive the exception. In the case of these antiheroes, violence does not serve personal enrichment or the creation of corrupted power networks. For example, at the end of the Mexican film Amores Perros (2000), the eccentric protagonist, el Chivo — a former guerrillero who eventually started working as a contract killer — walks "out of the picture" and into a "space beyond death" — a semi-dark, desolate countryside, his stature becoming one with the mass of dry, broken earth extending toward the horizon. Is it accidental that el Chivo's adoring love as well as supportive attitude, as was el Oso's, is focused on his only daughter who — living on the side of "full citizenship" — has become inaccessible to him? If, from the father's perspective, the sentiments toward the daughter become more essential than his own life, then existence appears as an active stance that contests the supposed impotence and "guiltiness" of "bare life."

Among Latin American films of the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Mexican production Amores Perros, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, has probably earned the most spectacular attention, along with an impressive array of festival awards. Sharply condensing a world of urban squalor that belongs to Mexico City, the film deals with a range of topics that are all linked to contemporary cinematic conventions. Its characters are grouped around the idea of a vertical slice through society where meanness and poverty are seen contrasting, and suddenly colliding, with wealth and frivolity. There are marginal youths engaged in underground dog-fighting, robbery, and a violent search for romance; there is a top model, together with her wealthy lover, who is crippled in an accident that destroys her precious body; furthermore, there is a mythic street character — an old vagrant—who was once a guerrilla rebel, spent 20 years in prison, and then became destitute, surviving by occasionally hiring himself out as a hit-man. In addition, there are car races, dog fights, scenes of street violence and obsessive passion, jealousy, hate, and revenge — offensive gestures and belligerent acts looming everywhere. The onlooker can recognize features of the supergenre telenovela which are synthesized in a well-made action drama. At the same time, familiar dramaturgical ingredients come as a matter of "generational" schooling — Alejandro G. Iñárritu has not hesitated to borrow stylistic and narrative elements from Tarantino's Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs.
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But something that is compelling in a different manner makes the movie significant beyond these parameters of success. The title “Amores perros” reveals a twofold meaning. The persons involved in the three love-and-repugnance relationships that together constitute the narrative grid of the film are all attached to dogs. Secondly, the obsessive presence of dogs within all three constellations marks the centrality of (dog-)life — and death — as the catalyst of a visceral force. It is a compulsion that accompanies and even enables human life the way it is shown to pervade an end-of-the-twentieth-century Mexico City. The film starts with brutal, smash-cut images of a fleeing car driven by two young fellows, and a bleeding, mortally wounded dog in the backseat of the car. Later, dogs are present in different settings of human interaction, either behaving aggressively or being vulnerable and victimized by other dogs. González Iñárritu thus creates a powerful allegory of “bare life.” These dogs do not “symbolize” the affection that humans can devote to animals in situations of personal loneliness. They lend “bare life” an ongoing physical presence. Their role is attached to both aggressiveness and the extreme vulnerability of the body, constituting a parallel that unites humans and animals under the circumstances of what appears as a shared “state of exception.”

Humans and animals sharing a common “state of exception” is one of the aspects that lends the film particular strength and a great deal of the dismay that it has generated among critics. However, it is necessary to understand this archaic component as a conceptual factor. At issue is a “politicalization” of life as it unfolds in a realm spanning the highly operative capitalist dynamics of power, palpable as an omnipresent drive toward commodification, and an exhaustion of the spaces of daily existence in Mexico’s capital. When discussing El Oso Rojo, I alluded to democratic society’s susceptibility to daily situations of exception (see also Herlinghaus, 2006: 49–50). Amores Perros shows, in an even more accentuated way, zones of exception interrupting from beneath the surfaces of democratically normativized life. Within these peripheral territories, democracy, which is supposed to define the space that separates “full citizens” from “homo sacer,” is neither self-understood, nor is it guaranteed to the people through the unity of “law-preserving” structures and the role of the state itself. This is one of the substantial subjects addressed by the works discussed here. Scenarios like those created by González Iñárritu can be viewed as “global localizations” suggesting that, for example, countries like Mexico and Argentina have come close to each other, not in terms of homogeneous developments, but from the standpoint of perturbing experiences inscribed in urban neoliberal modernity and thus, historical heterogeneity.

Illustrious metaphors circumscribing Mexico’s stake in modernity seem to display a genealogy of decline. There is Paz’s Labyrinth of Solitude, Bartra’s The Cave of Melancholy, or Monsiváis’ Rituals of Chaos. The director of Amores Perros abandons them all and creates another one: rituals of violence. Has modernity, beyond all premonitions, generated huge “public” territories in which a growing number of people survive by ritualistic incursions into violence? This question is not a deterministic one, and it
should not be seen as just dependent on the specific conditions that threaten Latin American civil societies. At issue in these films is not a violent Latin America, but violence in global, and still “modern” terms. To put it differently – what distinguishes González Iñárritu’s perspective from the playfully unhistorical, cynical, yet entertaining blood-spilling violence in several of Tarantino’s films? Are the protagonists of *Amores Perros* like Octavio and Ramiro, and El Chivo, “natural born killers,” to paraphrase Oliver Stone? It would be difficult to imagine that a film like *Amores Perros* could incite teenagers to follow the examples of these protagonists in real life. There is an ethical difference, tiny though it may be, that prevents affective montage from being absorbed into certain Hollywood-based economies of terror.

Let us look into how the three juxtaposed narratives in *Amores Perros* form a conceptual grid. First, there is the story of “Octavio and Susana,” set in a poor, working-class neighborhood where numerous youngsters live together within a small housing space, facing all kinds of trouble. Cofi is the name of a stout Rottweiler that Octavio uses to raise money from dog fights, as he dreams of running off with his young sister-in-law, Susana. Ramiro, Susana’s aggressive husband, works in a grocery store and applies his respective know-how to robbing other stores at night. Things go wrong and Octavio, threatened by the chief of the local dog-fighting scene, has to resort to a wild car flight, producing the accident that entwines the three different story-spaces of the film. All these are ingredients of common action plots. Yet the film’s dramatic gift lies in the surprises it creates. The handsome, almost sweet, Octavio, who pursues Susana against all odds, turns the Rottweiler into a sacred animal: to assume Agamben’s definition somewhat drastically, Cofi can “naturally” be sacrificed in the dog fights, but Octavio is inconsolably shocked when the owner of some pit-bulls shoots his dog. On the other hand, Octavio hires three men and “sacrifices” his brother Ramiro to a terrible beating, with the condition that he not be killed. Octavio is then severely injured himself in the car crash.

The implications for the structuring of affective space are telling. Octavio is presented by “action images” that relate to physically and socially defined environments. Close-ups of his face are notably missing, except for the frantic initial scene of Octavio’s driving the pursued car, in which his grimace appears as part of hyperkinetic cross-cuts showing his terror, the bleeding dog on the back seat, and glimpses of street environs. According to a phenomenology of the *action-image*, character and milieu are “organically” tied together: “The milieu and its forces . . . act on the character, throw him a challenge, and constitute a situation in which he is caught. The character reacts in his turn (action properly speaking) so as to respond to the situation” (Deleuze, 1986: 141). Now, the purpose of the protagonist’s “realistic” construction through action and reaction lies in situating the “affection-image” elsewhere. What acquire affective intensity in their own right are the depictions of Cofi the Rottweiler, as well as of the other fighting dogs. Canines crashing into each other cause a sensation of pure combustive energy, of bodies in their immediate crossing of the threshold between life and death. The director’s editing logic is explicit in forcing abject sensations: repeatedly, a cut interrupts the scene of fighting dogs at the moment at which
the canines attack each other, so that the deadly spectacle is deferred, that is to say transferred into a different realm – that of human relationships. Affection-images, in this context, are not centered on the body, or the look of a particular dog; they are the result of a de-individuating motion that makes affect “pure” and “all-embracing.” The viewer is thus haunted with the sheer potentiality of blood-soaked, ripped-apart bodies to surface everywhere and at any turn of the film. The movie induces experiences of fear as aesthetic sensations. However, shock-like effects are not produced wholesale but require thinking.

In the second story, “Daniel and Valeria,” the ritual constellation is different. Although the director is said to have borrowed several shots from Kieslowski’s film Red (see Kipp, 2001: 2), a sacrificial constellation lends his subplot an atmosphere of its own. The relationship between Valeria and her boyfriend Daniel, a married businessman, becomes crucial at the point at which the supermodel is injured in the car crash caused by Octavio. Put in the moralizing terms of the intimidated citizen, Octavio has been ruthlessly endangering, and potentially sacrificing the lives of innocent people around him. Innocent people? Indeed, the laceration and eventual destruction of Valeria’s right leg equals the suspension of her career. This is one of the few experiences prone to generating tragic sentiment, since it is the future of a young and sophisticated woman that is at stake. Visual contours of tragic sensation are framed in a match-cut, a sort of establishing shot in terms of intensity, moving from a gigantic street poster that shows a supermodel towering over the heads of passersby, to Valeria’s stupefied face depicted in close-up. It is the model who now sits in a wheelchair, staring out of the window of her new apartment at her commodified, timeless self-image displayed on the street, and unable to make sense of her situation. At this point, the director invents a doubling of sacrifice that will turn out to be devastating to the tragic momentum. While Valeria is paralyzed physically and mentally, her puppy Richi falls into a parallel drama: the little dog disappears beneath the floorboards of the apartment, and the vision that takes hold of the woman is her pet’s being devoured by rats. Daniel, the lover is drowned in helpless stupidity, being unable to understand how Valeria relives, through the disappearance of Richi, her own laceration, only to end up in melancholic hysteria revealing that the exclusive center of her love was the perfect icon of her female body. The body of the model loses its sacredness – its existence as a superior, religiously adored fetish object – when it is physically shattered: sacrifice as collateral damage among the rich.

The film contributes a remarkable hero to present-time imagination, and he belongs to the third story: “El Chivo and Maru.” It is Martín who bears the nickname of “el Chivo,” referring to the popular metaphor given to a “trimmed” gun or, more satirically, to the man’s being a strange apostate. El Chivo’s attire is that of a long-haired and bearded Methuselah in tunic-like rags and carters. As a phantom figure, he inhabits an abandoned storage-shack, frequently roaming through the streets with a horde of dogs surrounding the wheelbarrow in which he gathers trash and recyclables. People tell each other that this urban nomad had started out, decades ago, as a university professor, but left his job and family – his daughter Maru was then 2 years old – to
join a guerrilla movement. On his return he was convicted to 20 years in prison for kidnapping a wealthy businessman and committing other crimes. After his release he occasionally carries out contract killings in order to survive; at the same time, he arrives at a point where his only desire is to reintroduce himself as a human to his daughter who doesn't know that he is alive. Apart from the somewhat tendentious storyline, *el Chivo*’s role as the crucial figure is due to his religious appearance, combining myth with iconic corporality.

*El Chivo* has already been lurking throughout the previous stories, establishing an uncanny authority. In a scene of the first story, the man is seen in front of a garbage pile, standing up with a raised machete in his right hand, as a threatening statue, to symbolically shelter his dogs from a pit-bull that is about to attack them. In the central scene of the car crash, pertaining to story two, Martín, who was walking along the sidewalk, takes action immediately. Helping the injured Octavio out of the car, he makes sure to “rescue” the money that was earned by the youngsters in the dog fights for him. He then rescues the wounded Cofi, Octavio’s brutish Rottweiler, from the shattered car in order to heal it. These acts function as skillfully edited counterpoints to Martín’s pursuit of a young rich fellow he’s been hired to kill by the man’s business partner. Everything has been prepared for the assignment to be carried out, but when the moment arrives, Martín cannot use his gun because a group of children gets in the way. On another day, returning to his shelter, Martín has to endure a terrible picture: his stray dogs have all been bitten to death by Cofi, who has recovered from his wounds. Inconsolable and with tears streaming down his face, *el Chivo* gets ready to punish the Rottweiler with a shot in the head, but in the final moment decides to let the animal live. All these scenes suggest a peculiar stake that Martín has in the issue of power over life and death. A most disconcerting aspect is Martín’s role as a marginal person who is equal to someone who self-consciously decides about the killing, or not killing, of other beings. Both humans and animals are exposed to “bare life”; the rich business people are destined for a good and protected life, but Martín shows a strong sense for the exception. This sense is displayed in one of the final scenes in which *el Chivo*, instead of carrying out an execution, kidnaps the client together with his victim, and then confronts both businessmen with each other as they are lying, tied up, on the floor. *El Chivo* places a revolver at an equal distance between them, and leaves them to a destiny in which each will try to get the advantage that will allow him to kill his partner. In other words, to view *el Chivo* as a brutalized individual or as an ideological fanatic would miss the point that the film is offering to critical readings.

It has been observed that *el Chivo* is constructed as a conservative parody of the image of Karl Marx. Sánchez-Prado suggests an interpretation according to which the director fell prey to a prejudice that conceives of the urban criminal “terrorist” as a natural outcome of the political rebel. In that vein, the film could be read as a tribute to the fears of a conservative Mexican middle class during a time of the decay of the symbolically and legally protective nation state (see Sánchez-Prado, 2006). However, the film is more complex. What if *el Chivo* functioned, in a diffuse yet compelling
realm of “postnational” imagination, as a revenant, embodying deep-rooted religious-political myths and masculine moral fantasies? Martín unites in his personal history representative patterns of identity: the educator, the family father, and the political rebel. What we see is his having become a phantom figure roaming through present-day urban life. Like the Moses of Sigmund Freud, Martín has been “repressed” by the community; his contours are those of a martyr or of a prophet presenting an image of cursed and sometimes violent saintliness. When he shuffles down the city’s sidewalks at a steady pace, pushing his wheelbarrow in a majestic manner, exhibiting an immutable, charismatic appearance, surrounded by his dogs and avoided by the passersby, he inhabits a world “beyond.” However, his penetrating look behind his apparent detachment shows that he is more from “this world” than many others. Martín is not constructed as an exotic person; he is uncomfortable and unpredictable. His is the posture of the forgotten prophet, a post-traumatic hero, still an overbearing presence in his ghostliness, disavowed by his own daughter, and banned from the space inhabited by a citizenship that has become corrupted, amnesic, and mindless. His only community is the pack of dogs and, in a sense, youngsters like Octavio and Ramiro who have become violent in their struggle against destitution and aborted hope.

Somewhat theatrically construed as a prophet without doctrine, el Chivo confers an image of authority — an archaic father who is relegated to the margins, but claims an occasional right to violence which is ambiguous in that it belongs both to the father and to the marginal at the same time. This father, unlike Freud’s Moses, takes action in order to be restored in the consciousness of his former family, secretly introducing his picture to the photo altar in the house of his daughter and his former wife. If that which resonates in el Chivo is the fantasy of a fallen original father, a masculine super-ego in search of a community, this character stands out as a political postscript to the crisis of secularization. Several associations regarding the relationship between religion, politics, and national trauma could be drawn from here. What makes the hero special is his opposition to a Freudian psychopathology. The repressed figure is neither restored to a public (or family) consciousness by virtue of collective guilt, nor can he sustain a symbolic order as a metaphor of (lost) morals and law. Yet nor is the impossibility for the prophet to rise again by virtue of a collective neurosis converted into tragedy. On the other hand, a melodramatic turning point might have conferred a proper aesthetic place for an unrecognized father. Amores Perros shows how far a director can go, using a conventional dramaturgy and still undermining influential aesthetic styles. He succeeds in thoroughly enacting negatively heightened passions without bending his knee to either tragedy or melodrama. It is, of course, a question of “values” that goes with these dispositifs, since modern incursions into the possibility of either melodrama or tragedy are “exercises in cultural diagnostics” (Sontag, 1969: 138).

After the adopted fighting dog has slaughtered el Chivo’s animal community, the man experiences sensations of torment which lead him to a point of conversion. He decides to abandon his legendary appearance and to take on an external façade that seems, at first glance, absurd. A closer look reveals the parodist touch of what appears
to be the formal outfit of a weary professor, his fierce eyes veiled behind a pair of very old, broken glasses. It is this image of his that he now takes a picture of, and which he secretly mounts among the photo collection of his former family by breaking into their house in their absence. He also leaves a bundle of banknotes under his daughter's pillow, a fetish that middle-class families tend to equate with a father's traditional responsibility. Martin then chooses to go away, based on his experience that there is no choice to make. One might paraphrase Deleuze at this point—his thoughts on the immanent links between a knowledge of "missing choice" and "pure potential" (see Deleuze, 1986: 114, 115) — but it is necessary to surpass the ontological frame. In El Chivo's case, the "pure potentiality" of assuming a space "beyond despair" is negatively defined. He departs from the role of the urban nomad whose "reterritorializing" habitus could rely on occasional acts of violence. He moves from his previous sphere of abandonment into an open space, a "plain" space where such distinctions as the ones between "nomad" and "migrant," vagrant and prophet are becoming blurred.

El Chivo is the only figure in the film whose appearance is framed by "action-images" and "affection-images" alike; yet at the end, his presence mutates entirely into an "affection-image," erasing any tie between character and milieu. The man's final walking away from the camera, depicting both his and the dog's bodies from behind as they move into an inscrutable void, evokes the affective metaphor of "any-space-whatever" (see Deleuze, 1986: 120, 122). His stature is gradually absorbed by the somber grey earth that potentializes the void as an "expressionist" darkness. There is nothing left except "bare life." Yet the subject of "bare life" is not the marginal vagrant. It is the conscious individual who is excluded from all meanings, that is to say from the "constituent powers" of society's public space. The fact that El Chivo "chooses" to (re)enter this affective space, not as a prophet, nor as a marginal figure, but as a ghostly intellectual, makes González Iñarritu's film an extraordinary statement on the situation of today's world.

A Brazilian film acquires significance as an adjacent yet strongly contrasting case: Carandiru (2003), directed by Héctor Babenco. "Carandiru," once located in São Paulo, was Brazil's largest penitentiary and existed until October, 1992, when police squads stormed the complex, putting an end to a prisoners' revolt by carrying out an atrocious massacre. The slaughter by the state forces caused a wave of nationwide indignation, which led to the closure of the facility and the relocation of remaining detainees. On the basis of Estação Carandiru (Carandiru Station, 2000), an eyewitness account written by Drauzio Varella who had worked for several years in the penitentiary as a physician, Babenco, together with Fernando Bonassi and Víctor Navas, produced the script of the film.

Babenco has been well known since Pixote (Brazil, 1980) and his adaptation of Manuel Puig's novel El beso de la mujer araña (The Kiss of the Spider Woman, 1985). His recent work is not a prison movie of Foucaultian style. How does he address the "exception" which comes related either to prison reality or to a possibly wider context of state intervention? Babenco decided to mould his central hero based on the original
prison doctor, Drauzio Varella, the author of the testimony. The book,  
Carandiru Station, evokes the trope of the medicus as ethnographer: Varella appears as an attentive  
and thus committed chronicler, that is to say, as the author gathering the tales of  
patients who desired to tell their stories “back to the world.” The narrative design of  
the film corresponds to this model, in that it is constructed around the actions and  
the perspective of the “Doctor.” This physician, about 40 years old, is a model care­
taker, calm and attentive, professional, with infinitely gentle eyes — a man of goodness  
and confidence. He offers basic treatment to all inmates, irrespective of their chances  
of being cured. His infirmary becomes a unique meeting place where patients tell  
their stories, and from where — through retrospective montage — a panorama of human  
histories unfolds: some anecdotes, others parables, and still others dramas with epic  
and tragic peripeties. There are the gorgeous transvestite “Lady Di” and her dwarfish  
lover; the mulato Ebony (“Nego Preto”), the highest authority of the prison population;  
“Majestade,” an ebullient black man who is courted and cursed — during visiting hours  
— by his two “wives” who are also the mothers of his several children; there is also  
“Deusdete,” an adolescent who was detained for killing his sister’s rapist, and his pal  
“Zico,” who now kills his young friend when acting in a drug frenzy.  

The epidemic reality of AIDS and venereal diseases is addressed as the doctor regu­
larly performs blood tests. However, these are rather symbolic examinations: the tests  
give the doctor access to the men’s stories, i.e., to a reality that can still be appropri­
ated anecdotally (or epically), and thus escapes an abyss that is life-destroying. AIDS  
is a medical issue, or a narratological device, but it is not an immanent experience  
that involves patients as much as it could directly affect the doctor. Probably for that  
reason, prisoners are depicted mainly through action-images, conveying the narrative  
memory of their past. The doctor is the only person who is occasionally absorbed into  
affectation-images like his astonished or melancholic face, which transcend the immedi­
ate environment. There is another, very different “transcending” image at the end of  
the film. It shows the remnants after the massacre that has put down the prisoners’  
rebellion, in which over a hundred inmates were brutally slaughtered. When the  
camera slowly moves through ghostly corridors filled with naked bodies that are spat­
tered with blood, one might have the sensation that the images belong to a different  
film. The doctor had finished his humanitarian assignment a while ago. He will return  
to the place once more, only to see cleaned-up, dark and empty spaces. A laconic  
subtext, expressing his inner voice, says: “The only ones who know what really hap­
pened are God, the police, and the inmates.”  

A peculiar evolution from melodrama to tragedy has taken place. During extensive  
parts of the film, one could be reminded of Peter Brook’s thesis: in a world deprived  
of traditional religious beliefs in the existence of higher justice, melodramatic imagi­
nation can generate a “moral occult,” illuminating and sustaining life under the most  
profane circumstances. Romantic personal memory and entanglement kept the prison­
ers alive — their marginality was emotionally defined, and their heightened expressive  
behavior often transgressed “sane” language but always held tight to the meaning of  
existence as happiness, thus resisting “bare life.” The film’s overall ethical posture was
thus defined by the presence and attitude of the doctor-narrator, combining charity
and human compassion. At the end, when images of impersonal state violence replace
the narrative perspective based on the presence of the eyewitness, the ensuing void is
tragically defined. Yet at the same time it dissipates the ethical alertness the film is
striving for. An excess of violence may have accounted for the brutal intervention of
the state as a higher force. Affective involvement is remade into a distancing aesthetic
strategy, seconded by the above-cited subtext. If there is suffering, it either works ‘in
representation’ or from a distance that is kept intact. And probably, a glimmer of a
Hegelian transcendental spirit emerges, according to which “true tragic sympathy”
is inspired by our “fear of the power of the . . . order” that has been violated (see Hegel,
1998: 452). In other words, the Doctor in Carandiru, and el Chivo in Amores Perros can
be viewed as opposing figures regarding the subject-oriented experiences of violence,
sovereignty, and life. They both represent critical affective postures whose strange
synchronicity forms part of contemporary struggles.

The notion of “bare life,” in its social, existential, and imaginary relationships to
violence, has been emerging as a force field that concerns the status of aesthetic and
ethical experience today. Along the lines that our study has been developing, a larger
number of Latin American films in times of global modernity could be discussed –
being, as they are, genuine contributions to the historicality of present-day ethics. To
recall Walter Benjamin, his pointing toward the difference between “bare life” and
“fair life” did not only imply a wager for ethical alertness during one of modernity’s
most dramatic crises. It also expressed the urgency to take “bare life” into the con-
siderations of critical thinking. As became evident, this was not a category that
modernity had rendered obsolete, pointing rather toward the intricate closeness of
modernity and terror, and reason, violence, and sovereignty. In other words, “bare
life” was not an irrecoverable “other,” or the uncanny remainder of the dynamics of
“progress,” nor was it an unhistorical, religiously conditioned “quality” that existed
for itself. It could reveal, first and foremost, the relationships between violence and
life beyond – or beneath – the Western normative means–ends dialectics. “Bare life,”
as category, could point toward violent existence as normalized existence, that is to
say, to a life world that must be addressed in its conditions of abandonment to the
daily, immanently political forces of alienation and destruction.

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