ABSTRACT/ SYNOPSIS

Title of the Thesis: The City, Violence and Political Agency in Contemporary Latin American Film and Literature

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Through the course of this dissertation, an attempt has been made to trace aspects of urban violence in Latin America that have found expression in the films being made since the 1990s. The aim has been to identify certain key perspectives within the cinematic treatment of the urban experience. Furthermore, that cinematic representation of urban violence and marginality has been situated within the context of the socio-political and cultural discourse revolving around urban development and the lived reality of the urban space in Latin America. A theme that has been carried through the different chapters is the limitations on the part of the cinematic medium in capturing certain elements of the experience of violence within the urban space. This limitation is one that is marked by the politics that lie within the processes through which urban space is shaped. The film analyses in this study have tried to point out the ways in which cinema has tried to negotiate with these limitations and the cinematic explorations that have thereby emerged.

"Urban fragility" and fragmentation of the urban spatial experience

The first section of the dissertation looks at the way in which the more invisible structural forms of urban violence have been explored in contemporary Latin American films. Chapter 2 of this study focuses on the phenomenon of urban paranoia as an aspect of urban life wherein the invisible structural violence that shapes modern urban societies become manifest. Drawing on the work of Moser and McIlwaine on the uneven nature of the spatial distribution of

experiences of direct violence within the urban space in Latin America (Moser & McIlwaine, 2004), Kruijt and Koonings define "urban fragility" as this pervasive "fear of insecurity" that frames the perception of the urban space and is based on an anticipated and potential violence. (Koonings & Kruijt, 2015, p. 1) This paranoid fear of violence finds expression through a form of urban architecture which views surveillance as security. This chapter studies the nature of this urban fear that attempts to find solace in an idea of a secure space that is structured through segregation. Urban development directed by a rationale of segregation results in a change in the very nature of experiencing the urban space which is increasingly perceived as a fragmented one. This leads to a shift from the "assemblies and encounters" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 124) to an ordering of space that is structured by segregation expressed through what is referred to as a form of "Architecture of fear" (Gardenberg, 2008). Influenced by Willem Schinkel's concept of the "regime of violence" (Schinkel, 2013), this chapter explores the structural violence that lies within such an "architecture of fear" and how certain forms of violence are rendered apparent and dominate the mainstream socio-cultural discourse while other forms of violence are treated as invisible through a systemic blindness in terms of perspective that is historically constructed based on factors such as gender, religion, race, class, ethnicity and so on.

The films analysed in this chapter are representative of a certain cinematic treatment of the "architecture of fear" and "urban fragility" that is found in a number of films being made across Latin America since the mid-2000s. These films have been read as a response to the cinematic treatment of urban violence in the "cinema of marginality" being made in the 1990s. A narrative that emphasised the senselessness of this violent world of the urban poor where the violence was part of a system that could neither be fully comprehended nor dismantled was a feature that characterised this body of Latin American films which Christian León refers to as the "cinema of marginality" (León, 2007). The films studied in this chapter represent a cinematic gaze that is almost the reverse of that found in the "cinema of marginality". If the earlier films

had provided an observational portrayal of the urban poor living in the ghettos, the slums, in what is a form of segregated urban space, these films turn their focus on the segregated living spaces of the urban rich.

The form of "architecture of fear" that is made the focus of study in this chapter is the gated community as explored in contemporary Latin American cinema. The films studied in this section explore the structural and systemic violence that manifests itself in the intent behind the creation of a gated community.

The "Suspicious Person": The Impact of Marginality on the Urban Space

Chapter 3 begins with exploration into the connections between the culture of surveillance that frames contemporary urban life in Latin America to the recent past beginning from mid-1900s onwards when authoritarian regimes or government initiatives such as the Operation Condor used systemic surveillance as part of the state's exercise of violence as social control. The development of the concept of the "suspicious person" as analysed by the Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (Torres-Rivas, 1999) presents a framework for understanding the processes and categories employed by the state to render sections of the national population as not deserving of rights that a citizen would be entitled to. The potential presence of a "suspicious person" who is designated as a threat to national security creates a justification, as Torres-Rivas points out, for permanent surveillance. (Torres-Rivas, 1999) This chapter explores marginality in the context of Latin American modernity. While the previous chapter had explored to an extent the way class as a category frames the experience of the urban space, in this chapter, race, and class are both explored as categories that have been shaped by Latin American modernity.

This chapter traces the discourse of the modern Latin American state in terms of conception of the ideal citizen wherein certain sections of the population are marked out as being obstacles

to progress and development. The indigenous subject is conceived of as being essentially in opposition to modernity and hence the progress of the nation. Starting from state policies emerging out of such a consensus at the beginning of the twentieth century to the excesses under authoritarian governments, an attempt is made to contextualise the present situation of the indigenous subject in Latin American countries within a history of violent genocide justified through a developmental discourse. This is then connected to the development of the discourse of marginality and subaltern existence in the Latin American urban space.

The space of the slum, the *barrios*, *villas miseria* or *favelas*, is studied as a space that is created out of a struggle between the state and the state's vision of urban planning and development and the urban poor, the working class. The chapter studies the direct action taken by certain organisations of the urban poor in order to occupy urban land and thereby lay claim on their "right to the city" (Harvey, 2008, p. 23) as part of this struggle between two visions of statehood. The "cinema of marginality" (León, 2007) is contextualised within this understanding of the historically constructed marginalisation of certain sections of the population. The portrayal of the space of the slum in such films is countered with the ways in which these communities have tried to narrate their reality. The mural or street art is studied in this context as is the film *El Nexo*, made by a theatre collective from the barrios of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Cinematic treatment of Urban Space as shaped through the memory of Violence

Chapter 4 of this dissertation deals with the ways in which violence that had been committed in the past shapes the experience of the urban space in the present. The chapter begins by examining the narrative of reconciliation that accompanied the end of authoritarian regimes across Latin America and the return of democracy. Justice in the form of acknowledgement of the crimes committed by the state in the past is studied in the first section of this chapter. While

legal processes of judicial enquiry into the past have been uneven across the different countries of this region, the function of the Truth Commissions and the documentation of the state-sponsored violence under authoritarian governance is examined in the context of the specific socio-political character of the different countries of Latin America. This outline of the aim and character of various Truth Commissions points out the difficulties that lie in interpreting and narrating the past. At the same time the necessity of such commissions as part of an official acknowledgment on the part of the state to provide a historical understanding of the violence perpetrated during the period of State terrorism.

Michael Taussig's concept of the "public secret" (Taussig, Defacement, 1999) informs the way in which the approaches to narrativization of the violence committed by the authoritarian states is examined in this study. The power exercised by the "public secret" derives from the non-articulated nature of the truth — "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated" (Taussig, Defacement, 1999, p. 5) owing to the general networks built on complicity as well as fear that frame society under authoritarian rule. The study explores the socio-political and cultural processes through which "public secret" is ruptured and the implications of that on the way the space of the city is viewed and understood.

In the section that expores alternate views of the past, Allen Feldman's concept of "trauma-tropism" (Feldman, 2002) is used to understand the ways in which collectives specifically formed out of a history of resistance to authoritarian violence interpret the past. It is not only that such interpretations often challenge the passive narrative of victimhood of citizens under a dictatorship but instead inscribes a history of heroic resistance to that excess of violence carried out by the state. Furthermore, that history of the collective struggle against the dictatorship in the late twentieth century is connected to the present situation of marginalised existence and struggle against a neoliberal state as well as referring to resistance to state violence in the remote history of the nation in order to create a continuous narrative of

collective resistance against the state that draws inspiration both from the actions of the past as well as the spaces connected to the acts of resistance in the past.

This chapter also examines the ways in which the past is connected to the experience of the urban space in the present, be it through memory spaces, the literary forms such as the testimonio or the novel, the murals or street art or the articulation through cinema. Beatriz Sarlo's work on the testimonio and the subjective voice that constructs it point towards the ways in which the narratives emphasise the limitations that frame the experience of kidnapping, torture, or the general experience within the clandestine detention camps. (Sarlo, 2007) Blindfolded, physically restricted, often rendered unconscious, forced into an existence where the very conception of time becomes distorted, the individual who has directly experienced the extreme torture and suffering in such camps and has survived will not be able to give a complete and authentic account of the experience precisely because of the limitations placed on his or her body. Therefore accounts that attempt to represent the experience of state-perpetrated violence have to experiment with the narrative form, from an individual voice moving towards the conception of a collective protagonist or implement fragmented narrativisation, in order to depict such an experience.

Finally the films examined in this chapter represent a form of filmmaking that draws on the format of the film essay. The films are studied from the perspective of the ways in which the cinematic medium can be used to represent a past that is essentially lost or "disappeared". The films examined in this section emerge out of the archive—the documentation of past violence. The two films focused on represent two approaches of interpreting the archive— subjective exploration of how memory shapes the interpretation of the past, the violence, and the trauma and the use of the archive itself to narrate a reality marked by "disappearance".