

Bolesław Raciński  
Jagiellonian University

## Mexican Minimalist Cinema: Articulating the (Trans)national

### Abstract

In the article I aim to identify and analyse the specific elements of the Mexican minimalistic cinema (*minimalismo mexicano*) in both transnational and national contexts.

Mexican minimalistic cinema is a relatively new phenomenon that arose in Mexico around the year 2002 and is now widely regarded as one of the most important phenomena in the world cinema. It is often considered to be a subdivision of slow cinema, since it utilises similar formal and narrative devices. While the researchers generally focus on the universal, supranational aspects of the slow films, I intend to expose how the Mexican filmmakers make use of the aesthetic and storytelling devices deriving from the slow cinema to comment on Mexican cultural traditions, current social and political issues, notions of national mythologies and history.

The first part of the article focuses on the category of „transnationality” in the context of film studies, and the basic characteristics of Mexican minimalist cinema as the transnational cinema. The last part is devoted to the analyses of „Heli” (2013, dir. Amat Escalante) and „Lake Tahoe” (2009, dir. Fernando Eimbcke) - the two examples of Mexican minimalist films that, despite their transnational appeal, are deeply rooted in national preoccupations.

**Key words:** transnationality, Mexican cinema, Amat Escalante, Fernando Eimbcke, slow cinema, minimalism

### Introduction

In the following article I identify and analyse the elements of Mexican minimalist cinema (*minimalismo mexicano*) in both transnational and national contexts. The most interesting aspect of the topic appears to be the question of how Mexican minimalist films utilize stylistic and storytelling strategies that are commonly identified with the transnational

phenomenon of slow cinema<sup>1</sup> in order to comment on strictly Mexican cultural traditions, current social and political issues, the notions of national mythologies, and cinematic traditions.

I start by explaining how I understand the category of transnationality and why it seems fitting to use it in the examination and interpretation of Mexican minimalist films. The next part of the text focuses on the basic characteristics of Mexican minimalism as transnational cinema and simultaneously constitutes a revision of the most relevant characteristics of slow cinema. The last part is devoted to the analysis of two representative examples of *minimalismo mexicano*: *Heli* (2013) by Amat Escalante and *Lake Tahoe* (2009) by Fernando Eimbcke. These two movies, despite their transnational appeal, are rooted in national preoccupations and encompass two extremities of a wide spectrum of Mexican minimalist cinema. *Lake Tahoe* is rather comical in tone and its national concerns are hidden underneath an apparently simple narrative. On the other hand, *Heli* tells a grim and shocking story, which is clearly engaged with the current problems of Mexico.

The term “*minimalismo mexicano*” appeared in Mexican film criticism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mainly thanks to the artistic success of such filmmakers as Carlos Reygadas (e.g. *Japón*, 2002), Amat Escalante (e.g. *Sangre*, 2005), Enrique Rivero (e.g. *Parque vía*, 2008), Nicolás Pereda (e.g. *Perpetuum Mobile*, 2009) and Fernando Eimbcke (e.g. *Temporada de patos*, 2004)<sup>2</sup>. This term does not determine a clearly structured film movement, but mainly refers to directors’ admiration for aesthetic minimalism and nondramatic narratives deprived of climaxes and focused primarily on an individual.

It is also possible to use this term in the context of the production process: the discussed films were made for a (relatively) small amount of money and mainly feature amateur actors and unknown beginners. At the same time, it is noteworthy that—as observed by Germán Martínez Martínez—the discussed term is not homogenous and refers to films of comedic character (Eimbcke’s *oeuvre*) as well as to those which penetrate the dark side of human existence<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, their clearly visible common features undoubtedly allow for a conceptualization of these individual films as a group. The discussed films are created on the margins of the dynamically developing Mexican film industry and—even if they sometimes appeal to the wider audience (e.g. *Temporada de patos*, 2004, Fernando Eimbcke)—they are mostly screened at international festivals of art cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to remember that the films commonly identified with *slow cinema* have also been conceptualized as, for example, Contemporary Contemplative Cinema (Harry Tuttle, <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.com>), or *neomodernism* (Rafał Syska, *Filmowy neomodernizm*, Kraków: Avalon, 2014). The different terms used among critics and scholars indicate the importance of the different characteristics of the film. I use the term *slow cinema* because I consider it to be the most encompassing, while the subtle differences between other conceptualizations are not relevant for the present reflection.

<sup>2</sup> Germán Martínez Martínez, “¿Minimalismo mexicano?”, *Icónica 0* (2012), p.15.

<sup>3</sup> Germán Martínez Martínez, p. 17.

## The question of ‘transnationality’

In the article “On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism,” Mette Hjort accurately observes that this particular term is surrounded by an “aura of indisputable legitimacy” (by virtue of widespread „transnational arrangements in the world of contemporary filmmaking, and the undeniable transnational dimensions of earlier periods of cinematic production”), which, however, threatens to blur the definition and, consequently, render the term useless as a methodological tool. Hjort claims that „the term <<transnational>> does little to advance our thinking (...) if it can mean anything and everything”<sup>4</sup>. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim remark that the term ‘transnational cinema’ is sometimes employed in order to talk about productions created as a result of cooperation between filmmakers from different parts of the world; however, in this case the crucial aesthetic, political, and economic consequences of such cooperation are neglected<sup>5</sup>. Deborah Shaw also says that the problematic term “has often been used without any definition or explanation of what it meant”<sup>6</sup>. The prevalence and the inaccuracy of the term made some researchers question its usefulness in film studies<sup>7</sup>.

Due to the threat of methodological uncertainty, it is helpful to consider M. Hjort’s proposal to distinguish between *strongly transnational* cinema and *weakly transnational* cinema. She writes that a “given cinematic case would qualify as strongly transnational, rather than only weakly so, if it could be shown to involve a number of specific transnational elements related to levels of production, distribution, reception, and the cinematic works themselves”<sup>8</sup>. Another division is the one distinguishing *marked transnationality* (the audience pays attention to elements of a film which prompt thinking about its transnational character) and *unmarked transnationality* (for example, transnationality is not visible until the production process has been analysed)<sup>9</sup>. The present article lacks space for a complex research on transnational aspects of production, distribution, and exhibition of *minimalismo mexicano*, since it is the analysis of the film text itself which lies at the centre of my attention. Nonetheless, it is important to reflect briefly upon it, in order to demonstrate that many Mexican minimalist films involve forms of the *unmarked transnationality* and are frequently close to being considered as *strongly transnational*.

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<sup>4</sup> Mette Hjort, “On the plurality of cinematic transnationalism”, in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of transnational cinema”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010) p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Shaw, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing *Transnational Cinema*”, in *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013) p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> See Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Mette Hjort, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> See Mette Hjort, pp. 13-14.

## Mexican minimalist cinema as the transnational cinema: production, distribution, exhibition

In terms of the production process, Mexican minimalism is largely dependent on foreign funds. Neoliberal transformations which started to take place in the national film industry at the end of the 1980s led to a situation in which the state virtually stopped supporting non-commercial films. Independent production companies gradually started to emerge (in the middle of the 1990s the art cinema market in Mexico was small, but relatively stable<sup>10</sup>), which, at the beginning of the current century, commenced with the financial support offered by international festivals. Carlos Reygadas and Amat Escalante's projects are backed by the Hubert Bals Fund (Rotterdam International Film Festival), which also helps other Mexican filmmakers, such as Nicolás Pereda. On the other hand, Fernando Eimbcke was supported by the Sundance Film Festival when he was working on *Lake Taboe*. In search for funds, filmmakers take abundant advantage of the possibilities offered in cooperation with other countries, e.g. Amat Escalante's *Heli* is a coproduction of entities from four countries, namely Mexico, the Netherlands, France and Germany<sup>11</sup>. Even if certain state mechanisms created to support ambitious artistic productions have been introduced in Mexico (FOPROCINE fund, tax exemption for film investors), many authors of *minimalismo* are still forced to look for funds around the world.

If a film has been produced, the creators are usually confronted with an inability to release it in Mexico. As the critic Jorge Ayala Blanco observes, the total number of 75 produced films per year is inconsequential if only 45 of them are ever released to cinemas<sup>12</sup>. The director Felipe Cazals compares the situation of the national cinema to "an airport which is deprived of a landing strip": films are numerous, but few of them are later shown on the big screen to national audiences<sup>13</sup>. As remarked by Ayala Blanco, the production of Mexican cinema is "the worst business in the world" as recovering the money is still almost impossible<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, *minimalismo* directors have always focused on the international release, which means that films premier at international festivals (Cannes, Berlinale, Sundance, Rotterdam) in order to get foreign distribution firms (Media Luna and others) and reach international audiences. They frequently appear in Mexican cinemas

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<sup>10</sup> See Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press) (2014), p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> The influence of investors on the final shape of a film is another interesting topic, yet irrelevant to the present reflection. Researchers interested in the topic prove that film sponsors often require that the creators of artistic films fulfil certain aesthetic and thematic conditions which are supposed to facilitate festival promotion and international distribution. See e.g.: Tamara L. Falicov, "Migrating from South to North: The Role of Film Festivals in Funding and Shaping Global South Film and Video", in *Locating Migrating Media*, ed. Greg Elmer, Charles H. Davis, Janine Marchessault and John McCullough (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See La Otra, <http://www.laotrarevista.com/2011/01/jorge-ayala-blanco-falacias-del-cine-mexicano/>, date accessed 17 August 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Felipe Cazals, „Un aeropuerto sin suficientes pistas”, *Cine Toma* 5:28 (2013), pp.66-69.

<sup>14</sup> The new tax incentive (EFICINE 189, which replaced EFICINE 226) supports also distribution of the films, but it is still too early to validate its impact on the Mexican film industry.

at the end of their journey and in a minimal number of copies, screened mostly in the Cineteca Nacional complex.

Hence, *minimalismo mexicano* has undoubtedly a transnational character in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition: the films are often created thanks to international financial support with the goal of reaching audiences around the world.

## Mexican minimalist cinema as transnational cinema: style and narrative

The analysis of formal conventions and themes of the discussed films reveals various common characteristics which allow them to qualify them as representatives of the same cinematic phenomenon. Regarding the formal features of the film, there are visibly reduced means of expression: a limited number of editing cuts, deliberately arranged static takes, the absence of soundtrack (which often appears only during the end credits), simplified blocking, location shooting, and inconspicuous lighting.

In regards to narrative, Mexican minimalist films usually focus on individuals, frequently lonely and excluded from mainstream social life and consumed by a poignant fatalism<sup>15</sup>. The stories told by the creators of *minimalismo* are extremely slow and frequently deprived of clear act breaks, plot twists and climaxes. De-dramatizing techniques dominate, such as pauses and long moments of stillness.

Even such a superficial description of the basic aspects of *minimalismo* allows it to be associated with slow cinema: a transnational phenomenon, represented by directors from various countries (e.g. China, Argentina, Hungary, Thailand), who make their films thanks to the support of foreign funds, and aim to screen them at international festivals of art cinema. Moira Weigel characterizes slow films as follows: “their narratives are nondramatic or non-existent. The scripts are minimal and repetitive, with little dialogue. They unfold in long takes, captured by still or nearly still cameras. Often the figures in the frames stay still themselves”<sup>16</sup>. The Mexican film movement parallels the characteristics of modernist minimalism, described by András Bálint Kovács, whose contemporary manifestations the scholar finds in slow films<sup>17</sup>. Matthew Flanagan writes about the themes the creators touch upon: “Many individual works by these filmmakers turn their attention to marginal peoples (low-paid manual labourers, poor farmers, the unemployed and dispossessed, petty criminals and drug addicts) subsisting in remote or invisible places”<sup>18</sup>. It is worth emphasising that many scholars researching the phenomenon of slow cinema devote their attention to the authors of Mexican minimalism, mainly Amat Escalante and Carlos Reygadas<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. *Parque vía, Sangre, or Malaventura* (2011, M. Lipkes).

<sup>16</sup> Moira Weigel, “Slow Wars”, *n+1*, Spring 2016, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 140-141.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Flanagan, *Slow Cinema: Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, p.118.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Rafał Syska, *Filmowy neomodernizm*, (Kraków: Avalon, 2014).

Therefore, even if particular representative films of *minimalismo mexicano* do not fulfil the conditions of transnationality in terms of production, their formal features and themes can easily be identified with a phenomenon of international character. Escalante and Reygadas (as well as Rivera, Eimbcke, Pereda, Yulene Olaizola, and others) use almost all cinematic techniques that are currently treated as artistic and cherished by programmers of international film festivals. They employ codes easily understood by audiences familiar with slow cinema. As a result, when it comes to the reception and critical interpretations of these films, they are commonly situated in the well-established art cinema traditions, compared to the (mostly European) masters of art cinema, and read as touching upon universal thematic motifs (such as notions of spirituality, religiousness, search for transcendence). As noted by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “in mainstream film criticism, films are often lauded as universal stories in order to reduce the threat of unpleasurable difference”<sup>20</sup>. Although I agree with R. Galt and K. Schoonover, who argue that the “move toward the universal does not always have to be simple or naive” and “the problem of universality in art cinema is too complicated to be addressed by a simple dismissal”<sup>21</sup>, the most interesting approach seems to be the one which shows how these transnational filmic strategies have been used to articulate the themes and problems directly related to the cultural circle in which the analysed films were made.

## The cultural specificity of Mexican minimalist cinema

*Minimalismo mexicano* is close to being considered as *strongly transnational* in M. Hjort’s terms: it undoubtedly has a transnational character in regards to production, distribution, exhibition, and formal features. Nevertheless, it fulfils M. Hjort’s condition, which is “a resistance to globalization as cultural homogenization; and a commitment to ensuring that certain economic realities associated with filmmaking do not eclipse the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social, and political values”<sup>22</sup>. Mexican minimalists are mainly astute and ruthless commentators of local reality, and only later are they representatives of the transnational phenomenon of art cinema.

It is worth stressing that I perceive the application of filmic strategies and themes associated with slow cinema by Mexican directors as a *parallel* process and not as a process simply *resulting* from contact with the achievements of the slow cinema world masters. Associated with slow films, the anthropological turn of cinema, i.e. focus on an individual, started in Latin America in the 1990s and was partly a result of the search for new paradigms of national identity, different from the clearly political “third cinema”, which was concerned mainly with the collective<sup>23</sup>. This minimalistic, contemplative style is used

<sup>20</sup> Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, “Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema”, in *Global Art Cinema*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Mette Hjort, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> See Jorge Ruffinelli, „Nuevas señas de identidad en el cine de América Latina. Notas sobre cómo el cine épico devino en minimalista”, in *Tendencias del cine iberoamericano en el nuevo milenio: Argentina, Brasil, España y México*, ed. Juan Carlos Vargas (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2011), pp. 127-128.

nowadays by directors from the biggest film industries of Latin America. Hence, it is not surprising that it has become an exquisite language used to talk about Mexico. The director Michel Lipkes remarks that “in such a baroque and anarchistic country like Mexico, the act of contemplation is the only way to stop for a moment and to ask some bold questions about the shape of the world surrounding us”<sup>24</sup>.

*Minimalismo* is at the same time engaged with the national traditions and politics of Mexican audio-visual culture. This cinematic phenomenon enters a polemic both against the excessive aestheticization and ideological simplifications of the so-called *época de oro*, i.e. the golden age of Mexican cinema (dating back to the 1940s, but still present in the popular discourse), as well as elitism and artificiality of both *telenovelas* and the latest commercial cinema inspired by Hollywood. *Minimalismo*—paradoxically, in the face of the lack of the local genre cinema’s foreign successes—is popular at festivals (thanks to the use of transnational filmic strategies of art cinema) and is currently the most important ambassador of Mexican cinema.

In the following part of the article, a brief analysis of two Mexican minimalist films is conducted. Its aim is to demonstrate how filmmakers use the transnational style and narrative conventions associated with slow cinema in order to engage with Mexican cultural traditions and current social and political issues. *Lake Tahoe* and *Heli* have been chosen because they can be undoubtedly considered as transnational in terms of production, distribution, and filmic strategies, and they represent two extremities of a wide spectrum of Mexican minimalist cinema. In the first film, national preoccupations are hidden underneath an apparently banal anecdote. On the other hand, *Heli* is clearly concerned with the current problems of Mexico, but only concretization and exposition of relevant contexts reveal the full dimension of its commitment.

### ***Lake Tahoe*: the painful transition**

The narrative of Fernando Eimbcke’s second film is extremely modest: it centres upon Juan, a teenager who crashes his car into a lamp post. Most of the film shows the protagonist wandering through the dreamy town of Progreso, located on Yucatán Peninsula, in search of parts necessary for the repair of the vehicle. The story becomes more than a banal anecdote only when the audience learns that Juan is dealing with a more serious problem as he mourns his recently deceased father. In order to show this particular story, Eimbcke employs a host of conventions associated with the slow cinema. For instance, the screenplay withholds basic information about the main character, sound has only a practical function, and the long and static shots linger on mundane landscapes.

*Lake Tahoe* constitutes an intimate story, mainly focused on personal experiences of the protagonist going through a trauma. Its simplicity allows it to be read as a universal story which appeals to audiences all over the world. However, in the article “Beyond

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<sup>24</sup> Urszula Lipińska, “Meksykańska (nowa) fala”, *Kino 06* (2012) (The article accessed at: <http://archiwum.stopklatka.pl/news/kino-meksykanska-nowa-fala>, 13 August 2016).

Europe: On Parametric Transcendence”<sup>25</sup>, Mark Betz argues that, as Joanne Hershfield puts it, “critic must pay particular attention to the geo-cultural context of the circulation and appropriation of art cinema; in other words, to local knowledges and histories”<sup>26</sup>. The topic of Eimbcke’s film, a child struggling with the absence of a parent, is not indifferent to the cultural context in which *Lake Tahoe* was created. Quite the opposite; this is one of the most important themes appearing in Mexican culture in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>27</sup>. It is strictly related to the transformations in the structure of Mexican society caused by the neoliberal reforms that the authorities have been gradually introducing since the 1980s. A rapidly decreasing number of jobs, lower salaries and disastrous working conditions led to a situation in which one family member, usually a father, is forced to emigrate for economic reasons. It is important to say that these particular changes were accompanied by an epoch-making political transformation: in 2000—the first time in 71 years—the president Vicente Fox Quesada from PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) was elected from a political party other than PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). But the period of so-called “democratic transition” turned out to be full of ambivalence and contradictions. The country failed to generate the expected economic growth and the new democratic institutions did not fulfil the expectations, burdened with the legacy of the authoritarian regime<sup>28</sup>. The cultural trope of a growing child and absent parent is often interpreted by researchers not only as a reflection of a given social problem, but also as a tool allowing for an examination of the society at a difficult moment of transition, struggling with the challenges of the free-market economy and departure from the protectionist model<sup>29</sup>.

The adopted interpretation of the theme is also rooted in the history of Mexican cinema. The authorities, attempting in the period of *época de oro* to propagate the foundations of national identity with the help of state-produced films, encouraged audiences to interpret cinematic families and father figures as metaphors for, consecutively, society and the government<sup>30</sup>. In the subsequent years, rapid social transformations were frequently reflected in the situation of film families (e.g. *En la trampa*, 1978, Raúl Araiza<sup>31</sup>). It is worth mentioning that a careful analysis of *Lake Tahoe* shows

<sup>25</sup> Mark Betz, “Beyond Europe: On Parametric Transcendence”, in *Global Art Cinema*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 40-41

<sup>26</sup> Joanne Hershfield, “Nation and post-nationalism: the contemporary modernist films of Carlos Reygadas” *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2014), p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. *De la calle* (2001, Gerardo Tot), *Nadie te oye: Perfume de violetas* (2001, Marisa Sistach), *Temporada de patos* (2004, Fernando Eimbcke).

<sup>28</sup> The next president from PRI, Enrique Peña Nieto, was elected in 2012.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, „Innocence Interrupted: Neoliberalism and the End of Childhood in Recent Mexican Cinema”, p. 129; Dan Russek, „From Buñuel to Eimbcke: Orphanhood in Recent Mexican Cinema”, p. 136. Both in *Representing History, Class, and Gender in Spain and Latin America*, ed. Carolina Rocha and Georgia Seminet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); Carmen Elisa Gómez-Gómez, *Familia y cine mexicano en el marco del neoliberalismo. Estudio crítico de Por la libre, Perfume de violetas, Amar te duele y Temporada de patos*, unpublished PhD thesis, The Ohio State University, 2009, p.31.

<sup>30</sup> See Carmen Elisa Gómez-Gómez, pp. 1-2; Oscar Fernando Robles-Cereceres, *En el nombre de la madre reconfiguraciones de la subjetividad femenina, la familia mexicana y la identidad nacional en el cine de María Novaro*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Arizona, 2002, p. 107.

<sup>31</sup> See Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude. A critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983*, (Austin: University of Texas Press 1992), pp. 158-160.

that Juan is only one of the many young inhabitants of Progreso who grow up in single-parent families. The intensification of the trope allows Juan's story to be treated as a synecdoche of a bigger problem.

Juan is a teenager on the verge of adult life, which in the context of Mexican cinema—as remarked by I.M. Sánchez Prado—is a type of “transition in which success means becoming part of the bourgeois mainstream and failure results in being an outcast”.<sup>32</sup> In spite of making the story of *Lake Tahoe* centred on the popular topic of crossing a threshold, the film constantly postpones culmination. In this film, duration, monotony, and lack of movement replace action, dynamics, and variability.

Strategies associated with this particular approach are clearly visible in the narrative as the protagonist wanders from garage to garage. A garage girl only pretends to look for an indispensable part, a boy who promises to help is not too keen on fixing the car, preferring to demonstrate the arcana of martial arts.

The aforementioned state of suspension, which delays progress and a satisfying conclusion, is constructed with the help of stylistic and aesthetic strategies, such as long takes and de-dramatization. The exposition of time, typical for slow cinema, liberates the film from the necessity of causality (characteristic of mainstream cinema): it is the permanence and duration which become the centre of interest for the camera. This impression is favoured by the repetitiveness of takes (when Juan returns to the crashed car a few times, the audience follows his path every single time), but also, paradoxically, by time ellipses in the form of black-outs. If black-outs may be perceived as a culturally rooted, universal representation of flowing time—typical rather for classical narration than the narration in slow cinema—their subversive use by Eimbcke underlines the state of suspension. When the image fades in again it is difficult for the audience to decide how much time has passed or to notice any visible change in the situation of the characters (with the possible exception of space they are in). The relation between editing and the composition of the frame is also interesting: two separate frames are often juxtaposed so that Juan is located in different spaces, while he holds the same position in front of the camera. On a purely visual level, the change of the spatial situation is not correlated with the movement of the protagonist.

All these strategies are to create a mode of narration which at the beginning may seem incomprehensible and enigmatic, but provides an experience of extended on-screen duration. Juan's coming of age and his introduction to the neoliberal order have been suspended, whereas a capitalist requirement of constant progression has been replaced by a structure of eternal return.

Eimbcke's film—if read in the wide context of 21<sup>st</sup> century Mexican culture, local knowledge, history, and cultural codes—unveils a dialogic potential. It is another voice joining the debate on the topic of the condition of Mexican society, problematizing mainly the question of the abandonment of citizens by the welfare state, and the contradictions and ambiguities of the democratic transition process. The coherent and multi-layered vision presented in *Lake Tahoe* reveals the tensions resulting from the inability to neither

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<sup>32</sup> Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “Innocence Interrupted...”, p. 118.

fulfil the requirement of progress nor to restore the previous system. Eimbcke constructs these meanings with the help of filmic strategies associated with slow cinema; the experience of duration on screen replaces a classical narrative, focused primarily on a series of events linked to each other by a cause and effect relation. *Lake Tahoe* addresses a topic which is culturally and nationally relevant, but examines it with the use of filmic strategies relatively unfamiliar to the local cinema.

### ***Heli*: the horror of drug violence**

Heli, the eponymous young protagonist of the third film by Amat Escalante, lives with his father, wife, twelve-year old sister Estela, and a newly-born baby in a small town in the state of Guanajuato. As a result of tragic events, Heli's family gets involved in the affairs of a local drug cartel, operating under the cover of state Special Forces. The hero's father dies, his sister gets abducted, and Heli undergoes a series of cruel tortures. After returning home, he attempts to find young Estela with the help of the local police.

In *Heli*, differently than in *Lake Tahoe*, the audience easily finds information on the spatiotemporal context of the film. The frames feature national flags and symbols, a public servant speaks to the people, the presence of police and the army shows the functioning of the authorities, whereas TV news bulletins report events in the country. Despite the fact that the story, as suggested by the title, is focused on an individual, "the theme of a nation emerges" because "relevant forms of aboutness are flagged or foregrounded".<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the director chooses a theme also well-known outside of Mexico, which undoubtedly facilitated the fundraising (as mentioned above, the film is a coproduction of four countries) as well as its distribution (and its election as a Mexican Oscar candidate).

Thanks to *Sangre* and *Los bastardos*, Amat Escalante has become the leading Mexican minimalist, associated by critics and researchers with slow cinema, and rewarded at international festivals of art cinema. Surprisingly, the first half of *Heli*, until the cartel's attack on the protagonist's house, resembles a narrative characteristic of mainstream productions. The audience receives sufficient information to get engaged in the fate of the characters, a melodramatic plot emerges; Heli's and his family's dangerous situation is obvious for the viewers

If in *Lake Tahoe* minimalist strategies dictate the structure of the whole film, in *Heli* they are used more sparingly. Not until the characters' lives are disturbed does Escalante radically modify the mainstream conventions. The audience expects to see a police investigation or sensational stories on the authorities' corruption, yet they are confronted with a complete de-dramatization and an absolute elimination of traditional methods of building suspense. Making use of the knowledge of genre conventions seems useless and formulating hypotheses about cause and effect narrative relations is extremely difficult. Peripheral information starts to dominate in the story whereas the investigation does not progress, even when Heli provides the police officers with additional information. Finally,

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<sup>33</sup> Mette Hjort, "Themes of Nation", in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott McKenzie (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 101.

Estela returns home, but the audience will never know why the cartel let her leave. Escalante returns to the principles of minimalism by diluting the story, avoiding obvious solutions and climaxes. A scene in which Heli and Beto (the protagonist's sister's love interest) are being tortured is the most haunting departure from mainstream cinema conventions. Escalante abandons any ellipses, whereas the static camera captures the suffering of the protagonists as well as the indifferent faces of their executioners and the children watching the bloodbath.

*Heli*, similarly to *Lake Tahoe*, addresses current social problems which have been represented in Mexican culture many times. Drug cartels constitute a challenge with which the authorities and the citizens have to struggle incessantly. It is important though to underline the fact that the scale of confrontation started growing rapidly in 2006 when the president Felipe Calderón Hinojosa assumed power. The most important part of his program was to eliminate the cartels with the help of great military forces equipped with numerous prerogatives that were previously available only to the police. The number of victims in this drug war increased steadily to a total of 100,000 during Calderón's term; this number includes soldiers, police officers, gang members, and innocent civilians<sup>34</sup>.

The war on drugs has become a theme of many Mexican and Hollywood films, which show it in different ways, e.g. as a bitter farce (*Inferno*, 2010, Luis Estrada), usually using easily identifiable mainstream conventions. Escalante enhances popular methods of talking about the drug crisis by employing strategies characteristic of slow cinema<sup>35</sup>. Hence, he provides an original language which uncovers meanings normally invisible for the audience.

As has been already mentioned, *Heli* undermines the hypotheses that viewers create based on their familiarity with the conventions of the classical film narrative. Distorting the practices of mainstream cinema equates to a departure from the philosophy related to it; i.e. the belief that reality can be effortlessly understood and conceptualized (using, for example, genre conventions) as a coherent system of cause and effect relations, and the characters' motivation can be clearly identified. The world of *Heli* negates these assumptions. Employing minimalist filmic strategies, the director depicts the country consumed by a drug war as a chaotic labyrinth from which it is impossible to escape. The differentiation between good and evil becomes dubious; an unequivocal identification of the sides to the conflict is impossible as there is no clear division between police officers and criminals. The story itself escapes any conventionalized structure. Among all film and media representations of the Mexican war on drugs, *Heli* might be the most moving and the closest to depicting the real chaos which reigns in some parts of the country. Escalante undermines the thesis represented by many researchers of the problem, convinced that it is only a temporary situation, whereas the country is striving for success. According to this particular narrative, as argued by Marcelo Bergman, it would be sufficient to resolve particular issues for the problem to become easier to solve.<sup>36</sup> The world presented in *Heli*

<sup>34</sup> See Los Angeles Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/01/world/la-fg-wn-mexico-calderon-cartels-20121130>, date accessed: 01.09.2016.

<sup>35</sup> See also *Miss Bala* (2011, Gerardo Naranjo), another example of a film about drug war, which combined thriller and art cinema conventions.

<sup>36</sup> Marcelo Bergman, "La violencia en México: algunas aproximaciones académicas" *Desacatos*, 40 (2012), p. 76.

is too enigmatic and elusive to make the convincing identification of the problem even possible.

Escalante also objects to the model of presenting drug violence in the media, based mainly on sensationalism, dynamic editing and visual attractiveness. The media corporations transform the coverage of the drug war into a spectacle. Escalante refers to the problem by showing in one of the scenes from *Heli* a fragment from a news program in which the reporters and the police officers present the decapitated heads of three drug cartel members. The scene of Heli and Beto undergoing a series of tortures also depicts violence literally, but Escalante avoids any attempts to make it more familiar and bearable with the help of a commentary (mandatory for all news bulletins) or to bring it to the level of a purely visual attraction (like the mainstream cinema often does). The opening scene is shot by using a formal device frequently employed by contemporary art cinema directors and identified by André Bazin with “representing a realistic continuum of space and time”<sup>37</sup>: the long take shows the heads of unconscious victims of the cartel, allowing the audience to analyse the frame and discover disturbing details. With the help of stylistic strategies associated with slow cinema, Escalante approaches a representation of the real nature of drug violence which is not mediated by any mainstream techniques. This conscious de-aestheticization not only results in the disturbing fusion of violence and mundane life, but also constitutes a certain ethical gesture. It restores the original horror of the drug war, often replaced in the media discourse by superficial sensationalism.

Transnational strategies allow Escalante to appeal to audiences around the world and to achieve his position of one of the most important contemporary art cinema directors. Paying particular attention to the geo-cultural context reveals that *Heli* utilizes these filmic strategies to provide a seminal method of exploring of Mexican reality. They also serve to present a pronounced commentary on the social situation and the popular models of its representation.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate how *minimalismo mexicano* directors combine the transnational with the national. The films chosen as examples, Amat Escalante’s *Heli* and Fernando Eimbcke’s *Lake Tahoe*, involve transnational elements related to production (international funding), distribution, and reception (screenings at the international festivals of art cinema), while also demonstrating the affinity with filmic strategies of the transnational phenomenon of slow cinema (mostly by utilizing similar formal and narrative conventions).

I consider it important to take a closer look at the geo-cultural context of the examined films, as well as local histories and references. Only by committing to this method it is possible to discover and demonstrate that the studied examples are deeply concerned with national preoccupations. *Lake Tahoe* can be read as a movie touching upon

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<sup>37</sup> David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 154.

the problem of the abandonment of citizens by the welfare state, as well as notions of painful political transformation. *Heli* addresses current social problems that are often depicted in mainstream cinema, but does so by utilizing filmic strategies that allow for new insights into Mexican reality. Both movies (as well as other representatives of *minimalismo mexicano* mentioned in the article, but not analysed here) utilize formal and narrative features of slow cinema and provide a language that is relatively foreign to the Mexican cinematic tradition, yet enhance it with a more insightful means of exploring strictly national issues.

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