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CINEMATIC LANDSCAPES AS CONSTRUCTORS AND DISRUPTORS OF SOCIETAL
NORMS AND VALUES. CASE STUDIES OF *ROMA* (2018) AND *GÜEROS* (2014)

Master's Thesis

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“I hereby confirm that I am the sole author of the thesis submitted. All the works and conceptual viewpoints by other authors that I have used, as well as data deriving from sources have been appropriately attributed.”

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis about how cinematic landscapes act as a window to understand Mexican culture, history and society, by analyzing the films *Roma* (2018) and *Güeros* (2014). To do this, the research follows the theories and studies of the subfield film of geography, such as the film geography continuum, and semiotic approach to read landscapes. The goal is to demonstrate or negate that cinematic landscapes can create, mould and modify preconceived societal ideas, values and roles of Mexico. This, because the landscapes in the films explore racial, social and political situations that give Mexicans a determined identity. Both *Roma* and *Güeros* leave behind Hollywood conventionalisms, although containing the constraints of the author's own experiences and perceptions, in an attempt to portray Mexico and its society as accurately as possible. As such, it is through landscape that the plot and characters can convey a different image from the standard cinematic depiction of Mexicans, which may break existing stereotypes, and create new conceptualizations.

Keywords: *Cinematic landscape, film of geography, transactionalism, text-centred approach, landscape metaphor, class, race.*

Introduction

“We accept the reality with which we are presented.

It’s that simple.”

The Truman Show (1998)

Given the number of Mexican films trying to break through the national border to obtain the attention of worldwide audiences, and the awards that often follow, it seems remarkable that one could count, on the fingers of one hand, the number of films that have had such success during the last decade. Thus, the commonalities shared by two of the most recently acclaimed Mexican films, seem to be worth analysing. Both *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón and *Güeros* (2014) by Alonso Ruizpalacios are stories that originated decades before its authors decided it was the right time to commit to its production. Both films are personal in that they are built upon the experiences of their creators, which is why, to a certain extent, the narratives are set in the past. Still, most importantly, both films are a journey towards discovering Mexican culture and society.

Although *Roma* can be categorized as a domestic drama, and *Güeros* as a road trip film, they both explore social, ethical and political themes that constitute Mexican society, not only at the time period during which the plots take place but also in the present. Such themes are important because they help contextualize what it means to be Mexican, allowing a deep reflection on a culture that has otherwise been neglected by Hollywood stereotypes. These Hollywood conventions portray Mexicans as lazy, barbaric, morally degenerate or buffoonish, and the country itself as nothing but a sepia dessert (Blakemore 2017). To break this formula, Alfonso Cuarón and Alonso Ruizpalacios applied their own identities and personal experiences. They used Mexico City as a canvas to consolidate their ideas, knowledge and research about the history, social structure, and politics of Mexico.

One of the elements between *Roma* and *Güeros*, that is highly used to support the themes mentioned in the previous paragraph, is cityscape. Both films are a journey through Mexico City. Therefore, the cinematic landscape is one of the most important resources to decode the

social ladder of the country, as well as its racial and political conflicts. Through landscape the viewers allocate the protagonists in a determined position, and establish social interactions and relationships with places that would otherwise remain flat. For this reason, the concern of this thesis is with the geography of film continuum, and text-centre approach, to make sense of how landscape allows a broader understanding of Mexican culture and society.

This thesis aims to analyze the role cinematic landscapes have in moulding and modifying preconceived ideas of Mexicans, and to study the impact of camera techniques, types of film shots, architectural elements and scenery portrayed in the mise-en-scene, concerning the social and cultural meanings intertwined with landscapes and narrative. This will be achieved by analysing and dissecting the theories of the subdiscipline film geography, which follows a social, postmodern, and semiotic approach. The goal is to explain how cinematic landscapes do not function as a natural space of entertainment nor an objective documentation of the real space, but rather as an ideologically charged place, that sustains or subverts societal ideas, values and roles.

This work will examine how film and geography studies interconnect, by analysing the cinematic landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros*. It will explore the representations and interpretations of landscapes in the chosen films by studying social, individual, visual, and semiotic codes, that produce culture, and make or remake society norms and values. The goal is to exemplify how films restate, shape or create societal ideas and preconceived realities of the viewers through a surprisingly briefly explored element of film studies, landscapes.

Cinematic landscapes are composed of visual and aural landscapes. Aural landscapes refer to the sound and music integral to the cinematic landscape, and they are important because what we hear completes or challenges the action occurring in the landscape (Harper and Rayner 2010: 19). In other words, the cinematic landscape involves a complex combination of visual, aural, and movement features that allow for individual interpretation and cultural comprehension. Aural landscapes will be further explored in *Roma*, which does not possess a musical score, evidencing the importance of diegetic sound in the cinematic space. As for *Güeros*, in which soundscape is constantly modified by non-diegetic music or abrupt silence, I

will instead complement the study of landscape with coded cultural language, analyzing the impact landscape has when paired with determined slang words.

The structure of this thesis is as follows, the first chapter will be an introduction to the definitions and theories used to analyse the cinematic landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros*, which are mainly taken from the film geography subfield. The second chapter is an in-depth analysis of *Roma* cinematic landscapes, in order to explore Mexico's social and political circumstances, and therefore, get a better understanding of Mexican culture and society. The third chapter brings forwards the analysis of the cinematic landscapes in *Güeros*, following a similar structure to that used for *Roma*, and the fourth chapter is a comparison between the two films, that allocates the similarities and differences, and the effect they may have concerning the main goal of the thesis. Finally, the conclusion states the results of the analysis, and further areas of study regarding cinematic landscapes.

1.0 Theoretical Framework

1.1 Film Geography: The Continuum

Film geography is a subdiscipline that studies films as both cultural texts and cultural commodities, and approaches film representations of landscapes through multiple perspectives. For example, the subjective-individual perspectives, and the study of language, which help to better understand human actions and interactions with the environment (Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2006: 315). In the essay “Introduction: Engaging Film” (2002), geographers Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon point out that geography of film studies motion pictures not “as images of unmediated expressions of the mind, but rather the temporary embodiment of social processes that continually construct and deconstruct the world as we know it” (Cresswell and Dixon 2002: 4). As such, studying film geography allows us to question the power and ideology of representation, and will guide us through the relationship between film and geography, showcasing how cinematic landscapes play a role in moulding or restating societal standards and values.

For this paper, cinematic landscape shall be defined as an illusionary three-dimensional landscape, created through a two-dimensional photographic image of projected light and shadow (Hopkins 1999: 47). A landscape of film, “is a filmic representation of an actual or imagined environment viewed by a spectator” (Hopkins 1999: 49), which is complemented with sound and music, also known as aural landscape. To expand on the meaning of landscape, and according to film scholars Jonathan Rayner and Graeme Harper, landscape involves isolation of a certain spatial extent and a certain temporal length (2010: 16). Cinematic landscapes are selective, in a sense that they are produced by human interpretation, with their human physiological constraints, and biased social and political opinions.

Furthermore, aesthetic treatments of landscapes, regardless of the medium, painting, photography or film, involve additional selective practices, in which the individual or collective of individuals in charge of the selection make even more interpretations and omissions (Harper and Rayner 2010: 16). Cinematic landscapes are not considered discovered landscapes, but rather created, reproduced, or even invented. Therefore, they are not only selective but are never neutral in intention or reception.

On the other hand, a definition of cinematic landscape needs to acknowledge different environments, such as the rural, the urban, the large-scale environments like expansive ecology areas, and the micro-environments like human habitation. It is also key to understand that landscapes are composed of many elements, from manifestations of modernity to the presence of natural features, and it is precisely these elements interactions that create our overall conception and reception (Harper and Rayner 2010: 16). In many cases, cinematic landscapes involve a shared vision, and in other cases they are the product of a strong individual sense, but regardless of whose vision is being reproduced, it is always related to cultural or societal history. Yet, in all cases, there are references to communal conventions, designed to aid our memory to create associations and origins which, in many ways, are pre-linguistic (Harper and Rayner 2010: 18). Therefore, cinematic landscapes, “are portrayals that connect filmmakers and audiences with an innate and primal sense of self and of the world” (Harper and Rayner 2010: 18). As such, cinematic landscapes can have a direct impact on how the audience perceives itself and the real world.

During the late 1980s, geographers began to have a sustained interest in film. One of the first approaches of this kind was conducted by geographers Jacquelin Burgess and John R. Gold. They sought to identify “the various strands of theoretical debate in popular culture studies” (Burgess and Gold 1985: 1), by relating it to similar themes in geography. Their study was focused on two areas of media research, the American, and the European school. The first one is characterised by a liberal-pluralist perspective, emphasising individuals’ cognitive response to media, in which media institutions and their audiences have an implied symmetry that

assumes media reflects all the different views within society. While the latter argues in favour of a social theory by means of a critical perspective that does not focus on the individual effects of media, but which understands media as a conservative tool that seeks a consensus of the existing conditions (Burgess and Gold 1985: 5). This means that the European work sees the ideological role of media as a continuous negotiation of the status quo, underlining media content as an ideological builder of social realities (Burgess and Gold 1985: 5). While the American work “tends to focus on the individual and his or her opportunity to reject views offered by the media” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 35). By comparing the American and European school approaches to the study of how media affects the relationship between people and places, Burgess and Gold found the bipolar nature of geographic media research. This concept was further explored by geographers Christina Kennedy and Christopher Lukinbeal in their essay ‘Towards a Holistic Approach to Geographic Research on Film’ (1997). The essay argues that although the American and European schools’ analysis remains accurate, geography of film should not be understood as composed by two unrelated areas of inquiry, but as two tracts that act as the two sides of a continuum.

According to Kennedy and Lukinbeal, understanding film geography as a continuum that shifts from the individual to the societal is key to comprehend a phenomenon such as film. Their research follows a transactional perspective, and a postmodern approach, as each end of the continuum. Both transactionalism and postmodernism are used to understand the overlapping areas of the continuum, which are meant to connect individual and social levels, and its opposite aspects, all with the purpose to provide different layers of interpretation.

1.1.1 Transactionalism

As previously stated, one side of the continuum is transactionalism, a theoretical base for many landscape researchers (Zube *et al.* 1982: 3), which studies the changes in people-environment interactions. As such, it recognizes that the whole is a confluence of inseparable factors that depend on each other for their meaning and definition (Altman and Rogoff 1987: 24). Transactionalism in this sense can be understood as ongoing transactions

between persons and environments (Aitken 1991: 107), and seeks to comprehend the dynamic relationship between them, following their physical and sociocultural contexts, and its susceptibility towards time and change (Altman and Rogoff 1987: 24). This means that cultural values play an important role in studying both film and landscapes, as they are the ones that teach people how to view and experience landscapes. In return, human activity gradually modifies cultural values (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 36). This means that both human activity and cultural values are directly related to the construction of meaning and response to cinematic representations.

Transactionalism is a metatheory that helps understand cinema within society, and that geographers have used as a theoretical base to guide their study of film to interpret the transactions between individuals and media landscapes (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 37). A scholar whose studies were central for Kennedy and Lukinbeal to formulate the continuum of film geography, Leo E. Zonn, used transactionalism as a communication model. In such model, the encoding and reception of the message are directly affected by “personal and cultural values, past experiences, and expectations and goals of the individuals involved” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 37). With this, Zonn formulated a model of landscape-depiction that allocates the image at the centre as it is the element that links the landscape with the individual. This model states that “all media differs from one another in terms of the ability to portray landscapes” (Zonn 1984: 145), and the reason behind this can be explained by what Zonn named, the four basic characteristics of depiction of the landscape-depiction model.

The first characteristic refers to the fact that each depiction should be analysed using the individual’s ‘physical senses’ regarding the medium. For example, motion pictures appeal specifically to the senses of vision and hearing, but that doesn’t rule out the other senses, because films create illusions of conditions that may appeal to other senses as well (Zonn 1984: 146). This can also happen with creative literature, which appeals to the sense of vision, but which strength is completely dependent on the aspect of illusion of the reader (Zonn 1984:

146). The second characteristic is flexibility, which refers to “the degree to which the medium can vary the image’s character” (Zonn 1984: 146). In other words, the dynamism of the type of media, for example, motion picture, as opposed to painting or photography, is a medium that through a series of static pictures can portray movement, action and change, while flexibly playing with time, space and place (Zonn 1984: 146). In third place is saliency, which is the process that allows an image to show selected features of the landscape and depends on both the flexibility and intention of the medium. This can be exemplified by the selection of an author’s words to describe a determined landscape, or the number of photographs depicting the different facets of a specific place. Lastly, the final characteristic of the model is the image intent, which refers to the reason, purpose, or goal behind the creation of the image, in accordance with the flexibility of the medium (Zonn 1984: 146). This can be explained by the fact that every journalist, filmmaker, writer, and photographer formulate their creations following their intention, which at the same time, determines how the medium is used.

Another important contribution of transactionalism is the perception of landscapes according to transaction and depiction contexts. Zonn explains this through a second model in which information goes from landscapes to individuals through direct and indirect transactions, and can be best understood by representing four major types of persons in the roles of portrayers and perceivers (Zonn 1984: 146). For instance, there are two types of portrayers, and two types of perceivers, which Zonn separates as persons A and B, and persons C and D, respectively. In the classification of portrayers, person A, is the one that perceives a landscape directly, without any indirect transaction clouding his or her perception, and then formulates a depiction. Person B is someone who perceives a landscape both directly and indirectly, which means his or her depiction of a given landscape will be built partly by images created by others too.

Zonn exemplifies person A as an individual taking a photograph of a place that he or she is experiencing for the first time. While person B can be a journalist who after twenty years of living in Chicago writes a piece about the city having in consideration all the texts,

photographs, movies and paintings he or she has seen, and his or her own experience of Chicago throughout the years. Finally, persons C and D are perceivers only and have no role in formulating depictions of the landscapes. For instance, person C “sees the landscape only through the provided image... and the type D person has direct and indirect experiences with the landscape” (Zonn 1984: 147). Zonn exemplifies the type of person C as someone who has never been to London, but who has a fairly detailed image of its landscapes due to provided images of the city. While person D could be someone who after many years of indirect transactions with London’s landscapes, travels there and experiences it directly.

Following these two models, Zonn is emphasizing the importance of the place portrayed, the creator of the image, the medium with its flexibility and limitations, the audience, and the perceptual filters of creators and audiences, which are directly dependent on their life experiences, cultural values, and goals (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 37). This will be further explored in *Roma* (2018) and *Güeros* (2014), to understand how the different types of transactions influence the perception of Mexicans in the audience, according to the type of perceiver the viewer is.

Stuart C. Aitken, another scholar that explored transactionalism through landscapes in film, suggests a structure for analysing how films can communicate, through the interpretation of the cinematic image-event. His framework focuses on change and the impact of violating everyday expectations, increasing the involvement of the audience with the film (Aitken 1991: 105). The usage of transactionalism theory from Aitken perspective varies from the one used by Zonn, in a sense that he is concerned with investigating the person-environment relationship through film structure and sequence, rather than upon the audience-film transactions. Aitken applied his transactional framework to the study of the films of Scottish director Bill Forsyth, concluding that the cinematic image-event “penetrates the extraordinary within everyday life in Scotland” (Aitken 1991: 105), thus undermining the pervasive myths in Scottish culture, and allowing the viewer to make sense of aspects of the present cultural geography in Scotland. Aitken’s exploration of transactionalism will be relevant to the

analysis of *Roma* and *Güeros* landscapes for two reasons. Firstly, both films break Hollywood stereotypes, which results in a violation of the expectations, and increases the viewer's involvement. Secondly, both films explain Mexican culture through unexplored landscapes, that bring the extraordinary into daily life themes.

1.1.2 Postmodernism

The past subchapter guided us through one end of the film geography continuum by following transactionalism, as both a metatheory and a world view, and cognitive theory to understand films by focusing on the individual and his or her specific physical and social environments. The other side of the continuum is postmodernism, which expresses the impossibility of metanarratives and universal truths (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 38). It explores social theory, by means to focus on the “structures and ideologies that encompass and affect the individual” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 37). The main problem of the continuum is to find the overlapping areas between transactionalism and postmodernism to include individual thought and action, and the social structures and values advising that thought and action at the same time.

One possible solution to this was considered in the analysis of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Gallipoli* (1981) by Aitken and Zonn (1993). In such research, the scholars used not only transactionalism but also psychoanalysis and ecofeminism concepts—a branch of feminism that critiques male domination of both women and nature (Warren, in Merchant, 1992:185)—to investigate the relationship between man, woman, and environment (Aitken and Zonn 1993: 192). The authors agree that although these theories are by no means a coherent framework to study the portrayal of gender-environment relations in film, they do offer a partial insight (Aitken and Zonn 1992: 196). This analysis is relevant because it is the first study performed by geographers that strives to bridge the gap of the continuum through the usage of more than one theoretical basis, and by doing so it displays how cognitive and social theory can be connected in future research (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 38). This concept is

useful for this thesis, as the films *Roma* and *Güeros* will be analyzed through landscape transactions and other theories, to understand individuals' actions and social structure. The core ideas mentioned above will offer an insight into society-environment relations, and explain how landscapes could modify or create societal ideas and preconceived realities of Mexico in the audience.

The relevance of studying film landscape through a geographic postmodern approach can be best understood by following Fredric Jameson's work. In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1983), Jameson expresses that postmodernism has been categorized as the society of media, where art has entered into the world of commodity production (113). In his essay "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video Text" (1987), Jameson continues his research by stating that culture is a matter of media, in which literature no longer holds the privileged status of exemplar of culture (199). Finally, in his text "The geopolitical aesthetic: cinema and space in the world system" (1992) he explains that film is the pre-eminent art form of postmodernity. This statement is relevant to the postmodern approach of the continuum because it explains why prioritizing film analysis through a geographic framework is key to understanding postmodern media society.

In the essay "Re-presenting the place pastiche" (1994), Aitken and Zonn, follow the postmodern social theory and suggest that everyday experiences are not immediately felt. Instead, they are represented to us. This means that representations can be seen and understood as models for both social interactions and our experiences of place. In addition to this, and according to postmodern social theorists as Aitken, Zonn, and Jameson, our video-visual culture, and specifically the camera, has transformed society into a dramaturgical one, in which life performs as a theatre. Therefore we know ourselves only through our representations. By forming an opinion of our social interactions and placing relationships against media representations we can change our daily behaviour, and by incorporating what we see in films to our lives we become dramaturgy, "a product of the representation" (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 39). With this in mind, Kennedy and Lukinbeal state that life

is not only judged by staged productions in film and other media, but that our concerns and actions, in turn, construct and become social productions. As a consequence, the behaviour we have, in accordance with the information obtained in film and other media, may have a social impact. Kennedy and Lukinbeal exemplify this with the O.J Simpson trial, which caused a “nationwide focus in the USA on spousal abuse as a serious social concern” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 39). For this research, this concept will be followed in terms of how the cinematic landscape modifies viewers' behaviour and the impact this has in decoding Mexican society.

Connecting the transactional and postmodern theories allowed Kennedy and Lukinbeal to come forward with the geography film continuum, as they established a “relationship between focus on the individual and the broader concerns of social theory” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 39). Research on film needs the continuum to encompass ‘both/and’, because “a geography of film is not limited to cultural politics of place and space within film” (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 46). It goes from the cognitive to the social theory, and from the local to the global, so geographers and film scholars should find ways to link all the layers of meanings, materiality, place, space and scale, to formulate a better understanding of the dramaturgy that we construct (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 46). By doing this, there might be an explanation towards whether or not, cinematic landscapes play a role in shaping or creating the viewers

1.2 How Film Landscapes Produce Meaning

One of geographers' main contributions to film studies is their investigation of how urban and rural settings are used in film, because they have a broader geographic approach towards landscape studies and analysis than most film scholars. According to Kennedy and Lukinbeal, the primary purpose of the images used in film is not only to promote a place or to imitate reality. As such, urban and natural settings in film are created and chosen in accordance with their “aesthetic qualities, entertainment value, and ability to strengthen the story” (Kennedy

and Lukinbeal 1997: 42), and are often ideologically charged. Through film analysis, geographers offer an insight to comprehend and question the appropriation of meaning to cinematic landscapes.

In their essay, “Imagining Geographies of Film” (2006), Stuart Aitken and Deborah Dixon establish an analysis that breaks the classic geographic approach towards film, which was primarily concerned with the realism of cinematic landscapes, to focus on how landscapes produce meaning. To do this, Aitken and Dixon approach landscape as three different things. Firstly, as a medium to portray culture, understanding landscapes accuracy is in direct proportion to the way it actively connects with culture. Secondly, as an actor, by which “filmmakers use landscapes as characters or as foils for characters’ emotions” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 329). An example of this is the psychological context of the portrayed landscapes of New York and Los Angeles “as mirrors of the contrasting moods of Alvy Singer, Woody Allen’s self-portrayed character in *Annie Hall* (1977)” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 329). For instance, Alvy Singer’s dislike towards L.A is represented with a pervasive, glaring sunlight that reflects in buildings, cars, and windows, which “illustrates Allen’s view of the lack of depth of Los Angeles culture, in contrast to New York, which landscape is in warm earth tones” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 329).

Thirdly, they approach landscapes as work and doing work, following geographer Don Mitchell, who defines the notion of landscape as ‘work’ as a product of human labour that contains the dreams, desires and injustices of the people and social systems that make it; and landscapes as ‘doing work’ as something that acts as a social representative in the further evolution of a place. Aitken and Dixon exemplify landscapes as work and doing work with the British ‘kitchen sink’ movies of the 1950s and 1960s, which portray every day “landscapes and places of working-class people as integrally part of cultural politics in post-WWII Britain” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 330). The main goal of these films was to bring the protagonist down in his or her attempts to succeed, by emphasizing the everyday world struggles, and the gritty landscapes, which work as a conspiracy to oppress the characters, as they incorporate all the

frustrations of post-WWII working-class life (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 330). This last example is a more complex view of cinematic landscape because it acts as both a product and an agent of change.

Another aspect that Aitken and Dixon discuss in “Imagining Geographies of Film” (2006), by means of explaining ways in which cinematic landscapes produce meaning, is the term space. They argue, although with some trepidation, “that spaces are a structure within which images are created” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 331). Meaning that the framing of landscapes is connected to the construction of filmic spaces, which is often referred to as *mise-en-scene* in film studies. According to Aitken and Dixon, film is possible due to the existence of narrative conventions and its relationship with technological developments and camera techniques that stand over the filmic apparatus and allow for the filmic space to emerge. The space of a shot or how the action is framed is of great importance to film narrative, sequence and rhythm. At the same time, camera techniques (panning, tilting, tracking), define the space of the image, our perceptual position and our perspective.

This means that both, the framing of the action, and the camera techniques used, are essential to decoding the meaning of cinematic landscapes. For instance, the space of a shot portrays a landscape in a determined way, with a specific purpose and significance, and the camera movements can communicate an ideological position. To exemplify this, Aitken and Dixon introduce an example of the Ethiopian filmmaker Teshome Gabriel, who considers that the production of meaning through carefully selected cinematic techniques is very important in the Third Cinema genre. Teshome explains this by evaluating how “high/low camera angles can emphasize the socio-spatial disparities of subjects; the use of wide-angle shots can emphasize the communitarian context of subjects, and straight to camera dialogues can bridge the subject-viewer divide.” (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 331).

1.3 Semiotic Landscape: Social and Cultural Meanings Intertwined with Landscapes and Narrative

One dominant method of research on film used by geographers to understand how landscapes produce social and cultural meanings comes from the text-centred approach. This textual inquiry assumes that landscapes function like a system of signification that can be interpreted if one knows the language. Today, geographers read images such as cinematic landscapes along with the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of it as texts. This interpretation is done following semioticians Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, who expanded the notion of the text to include many other communication systems such as fashion, etiquette, urban design, zoology, medicine, proxemics and musical codes (Flowerdew and Martin 1997: 235). This approach, built-in great scale from literary studies, suggests looking at films as a text-like structure to understand the relations between authors, text and readers. The textual metaphor does not offer a specific concept by which to read films, but rather, proposes that any text can be understood, interpreted and constituted through an intertextual world of cultural signifying practices, considering its differences and similarities to other cultural texts (Lukinbeal 2004: 249). Using this approach, film is seen as a cultural construct, with intertextual references to other systems of cultural production and reproduction such as landscape, which intertextually weaves meaning and ideology into visual narratives that inform and reify social practices” (Lukinbeal 2004: 249). The text-centred approach will be highly used to interpret *Roma* and *Güeros*, to understand how landscape brings forward several themes, and the metaphors implied by it.

Film studies, semiotics, and geography share a visual connection that allows for an interesting insight into how culture and societal values and norms are made or remade. Viewed from the semiotic perspective, culture is a never-ending process of producing meanings of and from the ongoing course of social practices and shared experiences (Hopkins 1999: 50). Because culture is both a mediator and medium of social interaction, cultural creations such as film may be interpreted semiotically (Hopkins 1999: 50). According to Christopher Lukinbeal, social and cultural meanings are constructed and contested through film. As such, these

meanings “inform, produce, reify and mythologize class, gender and racial identities, relations and differences” (Lukinbeal 2004 248). An important, yet almost invisible participant in the production of social and cultural meanings in films is the landscape. An example of this is brought by Robin Flowerdew and David M. Martin, through a brief textual analysis of the film *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) by Robert Aldrich. Many scenes in the film take place at night, and through the usage of deep-focus camera lenses, the darkness becomes a shadowy disconcerting landscape. In one of the scenes, darkness takes over the world and disrupts the clarity of the screen. The landscape swallows the figures that are walking through the dangerous street, emphasizing pointy shadows. This image of the landscape along with the narrative of the film, which in this sequence is that of men hunting each other, followed by a textual analysis, explains the signs in the scene. For instance, the darkness and shadows in the landscape reference a world of paranoia. At the same time, the plotline of men hunting each other assesses a subject of masculine superiority, in which plot is reinforced by the landscape and vice versa (Flowerdew and Martin 1997: 266). Therefore this type of analysis is of great importance to decode the message behind the cinematic landscape, and the elements that constitute it, such as light and shapes.

According to Aitken and Dixon, in geography, it is commonly accepted that space is composed of several combinations of elements that influence its production, manipulation and reproduction. This is why the textual semiotic approach to read cinematic landscapes allows the researcher to ask questions such as why here and why now? An example of this is Aitken and Dixon’s approach to the work of Quentin Tarantino, in which they question Tarantino’s practice by asking how his usage of landscapes relate to masculinity and violence. As an answer to this question, Aitken and Dixon focus on the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and argue that Tarantino invents a disconnection between emotions and violence through the setting, that could or could not be Los Angeles because the treatment of landscape is rather impersonal. Following the work of geographer Scott Kirsch, Aitken and Dixon conclude that Tarantino’s lack of intimation of the place in *Pulp Fiction* highlights a quirky morality and social order. It is a film virtually without a landscape, there are no well-ordered views of the places where the

action takes place, Los Angeles is barely seen through the car window in which the characters travel, and all problems are solved in private spaces. This complex spatiality, along with the circular, interrupted style of the film's narrative, makes the film's morality difficult to fix in place and emphasizes the disconnection between emotions and violence.

The semiotic approach allows cinematic landscapes, as expressed by scholars Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner in the book *Cinema and Landscapes* (2010), to reinforce the inescapable truth that cinema has contributed to the imagining and definition of national landscapes and communities. With the presence in the frame of a significant, interpretable landscape, the subjects of gender, race, and nationality, come to represent societies in a realist, yet imaginative and metaphorical way. Cinematic landscapes can be both metaphoric and metonymic in its depictions. For instance, a metonymic example can be that of skyscrapers transferring the idea of a city, business and capitalism to the viewer. While a metaphoric approach refers to the landscape of suggestion, and as in literature, it intends to deepen our understanding of a subject or theme. An example of this is given by Harper and Rayner, using the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), in which the character "Jack Hall's (Dennis Quaid) trek across a frozen landscape is representative of his renewed commitment to a parental role" (2010: 20). The textual approach acknowledges landscapes' potential fluidity of cultural meanings. Still, in order to better read them, the recognition of interpretative filters linked to modes, genres, and auteurs, should also be taken into account. This means that in fact whether a film is a feature, short or documentary, categorized as thriller, horror, or road movie, and the national, industrial and critical manifestations of an auteur are relevant when reading and interpreting cinematic landscapes.

2. *Roma*

“My skin - very Mexican, very Oaxaquenan, and very human, from the colour of my land and the diversity of its colours.” – Yalitza Aparicio

2.1 Alfonso Cuarón’s *Roma* (2018)

The main character in *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón never made it to the end credits, but it is present in almost every scene of the film. The neighbourhood Roma in Mexico City is the centre of the action, and perhaps the leading character of the movie. As stated by Cuarón in the Netflix documentary *Road to Roma* (2020), *Roma* is a film foremost from the point of view of the universe and not from the point of view of the characters interacting in that universe. In that sense, characters and context play an equal role, but at times, the context surpasses the importance of the characters. *Roma* director, cinematographer and screenwriter Alfonso Cuarón was making an ode to the women in his life, but to do it, he needed to recreate the Mexico City of his childhood. Such recreation, made mainly from his memory and photographic research of the years 1970 and 1971, became the landscape of the film, which beyond acting as the framed space where the action takes place, is a careful construction of the Mexican society.

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of the cinematic landscapes present in the film *Roma*. The main idea is to prove how these landscapes build, modify or reinforce societal values and norms of the Mexican society. To perform this study, I will follow the research of Zonn and Aitken in regards to the film geography continuum, as well as Aitken’s and Dixon’s proposition on how landscapes produce meaning, and I will do a reading of the landscapes utilising the text-centred approach. In addition to this, I will use several interviews with director Alfonso Cuarón, and the documentary *Road to Roma*. This, because despite the narrative following the struggles of two women from very different backgrounds, it is the landscape that brings forward the themes of race, social class, and politics. According to an interview, to Alfonso Cuarón, by journalist Pablo O. Scholz, such themes, and the treatment

they have in the film, are not a thing of the past, but rather a reality in contemporary Mexico (Scholz 2019). But before embarking in the analysis of the cinematic landscape, it is vital to have a relatively detailed understanding of the film.

Roma is a black and white domestic drama that follows the life of Cleodegaria Gutierrez “Cleo” (played by Yalitza Aparicio), a housemaid of indigenous background, working for a middle-class family in the Colonia Roma neighbourhood of Mexico City. The secondary focus of the film is Sofia (Marina de Tavira), Cleo’s employer, and the family matriarch. Both characters are strong independent women, each struggling from the abandonment of their respective partners, but at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. On the one hand, we have Cleo, who finds herself in a short spontaneous relationship with Fermin (interpreted by Jorge Antonio Guerrero) that ends with an unwanted pregnancy. As it was not on Fermin's plans to become a father, he threatens Cleo to death if she ever dares to even ask for him again, which makes Cleo rely solely on the help and care of Sofia and her family. On the other side, we have Sofia, a middle-class teacher and housewife with four kids, whose husband Antonio (Fernando Grediaga) abandons the family, and initiates an affair with a younger woman, avoiding even his financial responsibilities. This abandonment leads Sofia to an existential crisis, making her depend even more on her housemaid Cleo.

2.2 Analysing *Roma* through the cinematic landscape

Roma touches on issues such as racism, social class, and the emergence of a more politically active society. These issues are not just exposed via the narrative, but also through the cinematic landscape, which functions as a reinforcement of the actions happening on the frame. The concern of this section, therefore, is with the aspects of the cinematic landscapes, and to a lesser extent, the cinematic space, that provides an inside view of the Mexican society. Unlike other films, whose treatment of landscape may be somewhat incidental, or have significance only in selected parts (Zonn 1984: 148), *Roma* landscape is crucial for the story, not only as a setting but also as a narrative resource. The following is a brief

introduction to the cinematic landscapes in *Roma*, before stepping into deeper themes that emerge from it.

Another critical aspect of the film, which has a direct impact on how we interpret the landscape, is the black and white photographic treatment. At first glance, it might seem that Cuarón had chosen to narrate the story in black and white, only because it takes place in the past. Nevertheless, the film has no grain, and the digital format is evident, which diminishes the nostalgic feeling produced by classic films, and sets *Roma* in the present. In the documentary *Road to Roma*, Cuarón says that the decision to make it black and white with a 4K digital format, was because although the film is telling a story of the past, many of the themes around it are contemporary issues in Mexican society (*Road to Roma* 44:59-45:50). Thus, the need to find a way to merge past and present, which is what the digital format side by side with black and white cinematography helps achieve. In terms of how this affects the cinematic landscape, Kennedy and Lukinbeal would suggest analyzing the behaviour of viewers in accordance with the information obtained through the black and white landscape, and its social impact (1997: 39). As stated before, the digital neatness of *Roma* makes the viewer see the film as a 2018 production, yet the black and white cinematography functions as a pastiche of classic genres, appealing to nostalgic feelings in the audience. The well-researched portrayal of Mexico City in the 70's decade, exposed through black and white photography, accentuates an affection towards the past. Yet, elements such as the violence towards race, revealed in the poor rural landscapes where ethnic groups live, followed by the lack of grain in the film, positions the viewer in the present social situation of Mexico.

Before starting the landscape analysis, it is important to understand the role of the environment in the narrative. At the beginning of the film, the first thing the audience sees is the inside of the house where Cleo works and lives. This residence is a cinematic space that gives the viewer an insight into the domestic interiors of a traditional middle-class family in Mexico. Director and cinematographer Alfonso Cuarón carefully introduce us to his home by situating Cleo and the context at the same level of importance. In the first 7 minutes of the

film, there is a sequence in which we visualize the entirety of the inside of the house through a 360° panning movement. This sequence is relevant because we are not only being introduced to Cleo, who appears in the frame on and off, as the camera moves, but it introduces us to Cleo's universe. The scene is letting the viewer know that the film will not be narrated from Cleo's point of view but from the point of view of her universe. Therefore, the cinematic space and landscape will play a vital role in decoding the film.

Following Zonn's direct and indirect transactions model, and his understanding of cinematic landscapes being directly affected by personal and cultural values, and past experiences of the individuals involved (Zonn 1984: 146), we can formulate an analysis on *Roma* landscapes. For instance, locating myself as a perceiver, type D, with direct and indirect experiences of both Roma neighbourhood and Mexico City, the latter being the place where I was raised, there are some clear elements in *Roma*'s landscapes that restate my social and political ideas of Mexico. Early in the film, we are introduced to a cityscape of Mexico City that we would rarely see in any other film. The camera is making a slow panning movement through the laundry area of the house, which is located on the rooftop. We see the sink where Cleo was washing clothes, the clothesline, a water tank, clothes hanging, and an infinite number of objects, but what truly defines the landscape is how the foreground mixes with the background.

We can see the neighbouring houses' rooftops too; they are all the same, even the few characters interacting in the landscape are performing as Cleo, washing clothes, which indicates that they are housemaids too (See appendix A, fig. 1). At this stage of the film, I realized that, although it may seem like an odd cityscape, this laundry area is very familiar. It is not just Cuarón telling the viewer that this is the residence of a middle-class family and that this area is a crucial workspace of housemaids in Mexico City, but my own knowledge and experience restating it. The landscape meets my experience on a common ground. This is the rooftop of my childhood too, where I would play around the clothes while my housemaid finished the washing. Suddenly my own model of the socioeconomic spectrum in Mexico is reinforced, and the landscape is not odd but almost intimate.

The reinforcement works as such because Cuarón is acting as a portrayer type B of Zonn's transactional-experience model. He is making a film about life in Mexico City, in 1971, using both his direct and indirect experiences of the city. For instance, he rebuilt his house and neighbourhood using his memory, photographic archives, and interviews. He based Cleo's character on his housemaid Liboria Rodriguez, and the reproduction of Cleo's landscapes are in fact, a combination of Liboria's and Cuarón's memoirs. This makes the representation of this particular landscape an accurate depiction of the middle class in Mexico. The creator is using his own transactions to construct the landscape, but it is also counting on the viewers' personal and cultural values, as well as past experiences to confirm it. Even if the audience does not have direct transactions with the city and neighbourhood, there is the fact that Cleo is a housemaid, and because this is a service not everyone can afford, the combination of narrative and landscape can set an efficient socio-economic background.

Later in the film, we see Cleo and the other housemaid she works with running in the street, it is their day off, and they are headed to a sandwich and tacos restaurant. The camera is, once again, making a panning movement as they run, yet, their actions do not seem to be the centre of attention. Cleo and her friend's running is only a narrative resource to show us a first glance of how Cleo's landscape and world look outside the work environment. This scene is familiarizing the audience with a new context, and as such, we leave the house behind and are presented with new visual and aural landscapes. The landscape consists of a bakery, shoe repairing store, taco street food stand, shop that sells piñatas, juice maker stand, a person selling fake skeletons, and many other shops. This is complemented with cars from the '70s and distinctive posters in every corner of the then ruling political party PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party). Along with the visuals, we have the sound of the cars, a radio, the organ grinder's tune, the unnatural whistle from the sweet potato seller, and dogs barking. This imagery successfully introduces the viewer to a hectic street in Mexico City, even if perhaps, only a determined audience has an intimate relationship with what they see and hear. As such,

the visual and aural landscape elements can successfully set the context in which the action is taking place.

Cuarón is telling more about the story with this one cityscape than he has done with dialogues and interactions in the first 20 minutes of the film. For instance, it no longer looks like the bourgeois residential neighbourhood Roma, yet the hecticness assures us it is still Mexico City. The skeletons in the bakery windows and man selling plastic skeletons, situates us probably in mid-October, as these elements are mainly sold during October and November in Mexico. This is due to the tradition of the Day of the Death, which is celebrated the 1st and 2nd of November. The sound of the radio speaks for a society that is not yet entirely consumed by TV and new media, while the street musician playing the barrel organ alludes to cultural elements that can still be found in contemporary Mexico, but are on the verge of extinction. As for the political posters, they do not make their appearance until seconds after the bakery is in frame. The bakery gives the viewer the information of in which month are the events happening, but the posters with the text “Luis Echeverría” and “PRI” reveal the final time context, as Echeverría was president from 1970 to 1976 (See appendix A, fig. 2 and 3). The analysis of these elements is evidence that this particular landscape of the city is not there by chance, and that the actions of Cleo are merely a resource to expose it. It is the landscape that contextualizes the viewer and situates it in a defined political and social circumstance.

The time and context set by the landscape are essential because they reveal that the story of Cleo and Sofia unfolds at a significant political moment in Mexico. The elections of 1970, in which candidate Luis Echeverría was elected president, were turbulent and, to a certain extent, conflictive. In October 1968, two years before the election, as interior secretary of president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, Echeverría maintained a hard line against student protestors, who challenged the political regime and demanded better conditions for the poor. These social movements, to the eyes of the government, endangered the Olympic games that were soon to happen in the country, so they responded to the protests violently, in what is called the Tlatelolco massacre.

The timeframe displayed by the landscape shows that the events are happening during the first year of Luis Echeverría presidency. Politically speaking, this is a moment in which students continue to fight the authoritarian regime, and farmers demand their lands returned to them. Historically speaking, it is the first time the middle- and lower-class will be affected equally; therefore, the landscape is preparing the viewer for a political climax paired with the stories of the protagonists. Knowing the Day of the Death is near is relevant, because, during the next 20 minutes, the audience will learn that Cleo is pregnant, and exactly nine months later, another historic student protest takes place. According to Alfonso Cuarón, the merge of socio-political themes with Cleo and Sofia's storyline is needed to express both, how Mexico was like in the '70s, and the current social situation, in which Mexican society remains as politically active as ever (*Road to Roma* 54:58-56:21).

This brief introductory section is important because it clarifies that the creator of *Roma* positioned cinematic landscapes at the core of the narrative and used them as a resource to contextualize the viewer. This is true in many instances, as it will be discussed in later subsections, in which landscape analysis will be towards deciphering the Mexican society exposed in the film and its relation to current situations. The journey towards *Roma* landscape will take us to view Mexico's social hierarchy and ethnic baggage, as well as its past and present political affairs. Once again, the idea is to understand how the portrayal of Mexico City's landscapes subvert, restate, or modify societal norms and values of the viewer regarding Mexican society.

2.3 Landscape, Class and Race

The Mexico City where Alfonso Cuarón grew up no longer exists, but according to an interview with journalist Pablo O. Scholz, *Roma*'s creator acknowledges that this allowed him to compare what has changed and what has remained the same. Physically the city has been transformed by the voracity of real estate development and earthquakes. But the landscape that

helps define social status, which up to date, is linked to race, has remained the same. According to Cuarón, there was a need to talk about the social inequalities in Mexico (*Road to Roma* 52:35-52:59). This was done not only through dialogue and actions but also through the landscape, which is why the neighbourhood Roma is of crucial importance. The luxurious residential area serves as a symbol to contrast with the social differences of other environments in which Cleo interacts. As Cuarón stated in an interview conducted by Fernanda Solórzano for the magazine *Letras Libres*, what surprised him the most when talking to his own housemaid Liboria, was discovering her social life outside of the bubble. It revealed to him a whole other universe because Liboria told him of a social context almost opposite to the world inside the house.

Halfway through the film, there is a scene in which Cuarón turns, once again, to the resource of the characters running to give the viewer a glimpse of the environment through a panning camera movement. This time we are following the family Cleo works for. The kids, grandmother, and Cleo are walking in Roma neighbourhood to go to the nearest cinema. Suddenly, the oldest of the kids starts ringing the neighbours' doorbells and running towards the cinema. As a result, Cleo runs behind him, and we are presented with the splendour and luxury of Roma neighbourhood. Once again, Cleo and the kid are secondary; what matters is the landscape presented. The urban landscape portrays beautiful houses with wide doors and windows, a veterinary clinic, a wedding shop, the cinema theatre Las Americas, a travel agency, and fancy restaurants (See appendix A, fig. 4). Along the street, we also observe modern cars from the 70's decade, and opposite to the previously described scene, in which Cleo is having a day off, there are no political propaganda posters anywhere in the street. In terms of aural landscape, we are presented with the noise of the cars, the veterinary talking to a pet owner, water falling near Cleo from a shop being cleaned, the whistle of the traffic police, and the lottery seller's speech.

According to Kennedy and Lukinbeal studies of geography of film, the urban landscape constantly changes to represent the values, styles, and situations of new generations (Kennedy

and Lukinbeal 1997: 42). And although what we are observing in the frame is a well-researched landscape portrayal of Roma neighbourhood in Mexico City during 1971, Cuarón is trying to expose, through the landscape, the social inequalities that exist in Mexican society even now. Perhaps earthquakes and real estate have physically changed the Roma district, but the images of the city and particularly this neighbourhood are there as a social construct of the contemporary middle-class in Mexico. For instance, it was true then and it is true now that only the middle- and high-class can afford services like veterinarians, or travel agencies. This scene, compared to the one in which Cleo and the other housemaid run towards the sandwich restaurant, portrays an evident contrast in landscapes within the same city. The secondary cityscape is a rather popular area of Mexico City, it has no glamorous shops, restaurants and houses around.

On the other hand, politically speaking, it is clear that the government targets popular areas more than middle- and high-class neighbourhoods. This last is evident because opposite to the landscape shown during Cleo's day off, the Roma district has no political propaganda. In terms of race, the sequence described in the previous two paragraphs makes a statement about the innate racism in Mexican society. According to what is seen, Roma neighbourhood is inhabited by fair-skinned people, which makes Cleo's indigenous features even more evident as she interacts in the landscape. This allocates Cleo and the family she works for onto opposite sides of the social spectrum. In that sense, and as exposed by Aitken and Dixon, landscape in *Roma* does not work as a passive stage upon which culture struts its stuff (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 329). Rather, its accuracy is about how actively it connects with culture both in the past and present. Thus, landscape acts as a medium to understand the Mexican society, not as a factor.

Another scene in which social class, race and landscape are evidently connected, is that in which Cleo arrives in a rural area seeking the address of Fermín's cousin to see if he can help her find Fermín. The landscape is a complete opposite of what we observed in the previous

scenes portraying Roma neighbourhood and Mexico City. According to the bus Cleo arrives in, she is in Nezahualcoyotl City, Estado de México, located a couple of hours away from Mexico City. The streets have no pavement and the floor is just mud, it seems as though electricity had recently been put up, there are plenty of street dogs, houses are made of trash, and only very few cars are visible (See appendix A, fig. 5). The aural landscape is also radically different from the bustle of the city, there is an entertainment show, brought to the area by the government, performing with drums and trumpets, babies crying, kids running, several radios and a pig making noises.

This rural landscape, along with the fact that the only characters interacting in it are from indigenous origins, opens the possibility of interpreting the landscape as a metaphor through Burgess and Gold's definition of stereotypes. Stereotypes for geographers "are a process of categorization through which distinctive features of one place are used to give identity" (Burgess and Gold 1985: 10). Considering this, *Roma* exposes the viewer to a clear relationship between race, class, and landscape in Mexican society. There is the middle-class cityscape of Roma neighbourhood, the landscape of the popular neighbourhood Cleo visits during her free day, and the impoverished rural landscape of Nezahualcoyotl City. The first and latter one represent the opposites and situate Cleo's indigenous roots in the middle.

Cleo's interactions with Roma neighbourhood landscape are the same as her relationship with the family employing her. Narratively speaking, her employers act and refer to Cleo as if she was part of the family, but with a set boundary. According to director Alfonso Cuarón, "In the same breath, it's: We really love you, but go and wash the clothes, and bring the Twinkie wonders, and make a smoothie for me. And at the same time, when everything goes wrong, it's your fault. Why didn't you clean the dog poo?" (Cuarón 2018). The same happens with her interactions within Roma's neighbourhood landscape, she works and lives there, but her racial features prevent her from fitting in as a local inhabitant. The distinctive elements of the bourgeois place do not match her physical characteristics; hence, the stereotype of fair skin and opulence is created. On the other hand, the rural area where Fermín and his cousin live is a

place where only characters with indigenous features interact, which creates a stereotype of the poor. With this, *Roma*'s landscape works as an insight of the social spheres in Mexico, and attacks themes such as racism, without directly telling the viewer how to feel or think towards the matter. Once again, following geographer Leo Zonn, this will also depend on the viewer's own experiences, but Cuarón is clearly defining the relationship between race and class through the usage of landscapes.

2.4 1970 Mexico City: representing politics of the 21st Century

Roma's story takes place during the beginning of the 1970s side by side with the so-called Dirty War in Mexico, which took place between 1968 and 1982. The Dirty War refers to the internal conflict between the government and left-wing students in Mexico during the peak of the Cold War. Such political upheaval led to several protests and two massacres, the Tlatelolco Massacre in October 1968, and the Corpus Christi Massacre in June 1971. This political tension plays an important role in the film, and at times it becomes the protagonist by abruptly modifying the cinematic landscape. The shadow of the brutal legacy of the then-president Luis Echeverría is exposed primarily through the aural landscape, but also through the protests, political propaganda, and even a circus-like campaign event that takes place in the film. With this, *Roma* presents a landscape that contains not only social injustices but also political themes that seem rather contemporary despite being set in the past.

Following Aitken and Dixon's approach to landscapes as work and doing work, the film portrays the everyday landscapes of urban and rural Mexico as an integral part of the country's politics, making it a representation of Mexico's further political evolution. One of the first approaches towards *Roma*'s political statements occurs during the scene in which Cleo and the other housemaid are enjoying their free day. As described earlier, this landscape introduces the viewer to a popular street in Mexico City plagued with propaganda from the political party PRI. This introduction contextualizes the story and sets it at the beginning of the '70s, only two years after the conflicts between the government and left-wing students began. It also hints the viewer on the oppressive political system, because the candidate displayed in the

political pamphlets, and who had won the election in June 1970, is Luis Echeverría. This important character in Mexican history had previously worked as Mexico's interior secretary, and in October 1968, led the government response towards the students' protests, which resulted in the Tlatelolco massacre. The relevance of this political propaganda in the cinematic landscape encompasses the meanings of tyranny and impunity for the powerful that continues to exist in Mexican politics today (Le Clercq 2018: 56).

In terms of how landscape works and does work, Cuarón said to interviewer Scott Johnson for the *Hollywood Reporter*, that what he intended with *Roma* was for it to become a window towards both what had and had not changed in Mexico (Johnson 2019). Politically speaking, *Roma* was produced towards the end of Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency (Dec 2012 - Nov 2018) in 2017-2018. Peña Nieto's political party was also the Revolutionary Institutional Party, known as PRI, which had been out of power for the previous 12 years, and made an unexpected comeback in 2012. His mandate, like Luis Echeverría in the '70s, was marked by the kidnapping and assassination of students, except this time it was 43 male students from Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. The political pamphlets portrayed in *Roma's* cityscape are something that, at the time the film was released, appeared not as something from the past, but as a remembrance of what the PRI party represented. This landscape modification through political propaganda functions as a statement of the political situation during Peña Nieto's presidency. Hence, the landscape works as a representation of the political evolution of the country.

Mexico was governed by the Revolutionary Institutional Party for 71 consecutive years, from 1929 to 2000. Its strategy to remain in power, aside from never-ending tricks to cheat the democratic system, was, as once described by the Roman poet Juvenal in his satire X, *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses). This political strategy refers to the populist method used by the ancient Roman empire to win followers and favours from the people. Like the Roman empire, the PRI political party made use of elaborate campaigns targeting those with limited resources and education, offering them food, money, and cheap entertainment in exchange for

votes and support (Rodriguez, 2005: 209). In *Roma*, during the sequence in which Cleo goes looking for Fermín's cousin, the viewer is presented with an aural landscape that directly references such a political strategy. As soon as Cleo gets off the bus, it is evident that the bourgeois Roma neighbourhood is no longer nearby. Both audio and visual landscapes hint to the viewer that this is a poor rural area, but there is one particular element that brings the political theme upfront. This element is the circus-type entertainment show happening in the background. Visually we see a man thrown by a canyon, flying in the air, but it is sound that modifies the landscape and makes a political statement. Among the rather quiet area, the speech of a man being grateful to the then-president Luis Echeverría stands out. People begin to clap, even those far from the show, and it becomes ironic, given the poor living conditions of this area and its inhabitants. From this scene and its landscape, it is clear that Cuarón was seeking to directly reference the bread and circus strategy undertaken by the government both at the time of the narrative and the time the film was produced. This is why the combination of the visual and aural landscape works as a representation of the country's social and political circumstances.

Hints of the political situation abound in the film. At the beginning of the film, the tune of a military marching band makes its way down Roma neighbourhood as Antonio leaves his family behind, under the excuse that he has a work trip, while Sofía realizes her husband is never coming back. At the beginning of the scene, the band is rather distant, but as Antonio drives away, the tune gets closer and closer. If we read the film from the text-centred approach, and in relation to the narrative, the landscape is being abruptly interrupted. The calm residential neighbourhood of Roma is being somewhat disrupted by the military marching band, that, if anything, seems out of place, but is discreetly queuing the audience on what is coming next (See appendix A, fig. 6). This scene is the first one in which the political and social forces at the time come together with the domestic drama, yet neither of them acknowledges it. The band, signifying the rise of political riots between middle-class students and the government, marches around a preoccupied mother, the same way many families will soon be left in desolation by the protests and massacre to come. The band is marching in the

residential neighbourhood, in a landscape that does not integrate it, but rather, makes it evident that it does not fit in. With this textual approach, the viewer can read and understand how politics gradually infiltrate the landscapes of *Roma*, even if the knowledge of the political background is minimum.

So far, we have come across elements of the aural and visual landscapes that explain the political situation of the '70s, and some of the implications of the PRI party's return in 2012 with president Enrique Peña Nieto. Nevertheless, to understand how the politics discussed in *Roma* have a direct relationship with the present political situation of the country, it is necessary to continue digging into history. It is through historical background that we can formulate a textual analysis of the landscape and narrative, to decode the implied political concerns of the film towards contemporary Mexico. For instance, later in the film, we discover that Cleo's romantic interest, Fermín, is a member of Los Halcones (The Falcons), a paramilitary group working for the government to repress student demonstrations. This group, made up mainly of right-wing activists and criminals, is in charge of breaking the students' gatherings by infiltrating the meetings and protests disguised as students themselves.

In *Roma*, there is a scene in which Cleo is taken to a furniture shop to choose a cradle for the unborn baby. The sequence contains a landscape of Mexico City taken by students protesting peacefully (See appendix A, fig. 7). This scene begins with a panning camera movement that introduces the viewer to Calzada Mexico Tacuba street. Here, we can observe the police force sent by the government to control the masses, stores closing under the threat of possible danger, and young people walking with flags and posters. Then, the camera stops for a few seconds and we are presented with the building where the furniture store is located, and the students standing in the street. In terms of aural landscape, we can listen to the youngsters singing and marching to the tune of the national anthem, followed by the anthem of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, police officers speaking, and the noise of the metallic doors of the shops being closed. This first part of the sequence is important because both narrative and landscape remain peaceful. The viewer can connect facts, such as the

protesters being students due to the university anthem they are singing. There is a protest happening, yet, the only threat is the police force, who remain calm because there is no need to interfere.

As the scene continues, Cleo is now upstairs in the furniture shop, and the landscape of the city can be seen through the windows of the store. Suddenly screams and chaos break into the scene, and the landscape of Calzada Mexico Tacuba is disrupted by people running, shouting, and gunshots. The Falcons infiltrate the protest and terrorize the students; at this point, two young scholars run to the furniture store in search of refuge but are followed and murdered. This is the moment when the audience realizes that Fermín is part of the paramilitary group that is killing students, and due to this impact, Cleo goes into labour. As Cleo hurries back to the car to get to the hospital, we see the landscape of Calzada Mexico Tacuba street once again. This time everything is different, there are dead bodies on the ground, and there are people crying and running (See Appendix A, fig. 8). This particular scene of *Roma* is based on the photographs of the newspapers that appeared in the following days, calling the event El Halconazo, and to which ten-year-old Alfonso Cuarón was exposed to. In the documentary *Road to Roma*, he mentions that at his young age he understood that he could also be in danger, being a student himself and that this was the first time the wellness of the middle-class, which he belonged to, was broken (48:14-49:49). He continues by explaining that the importance of the landscape in this scene is because it is Calzada Mexico Tacuba street, along with the panning camera movement from afar, that gives the narrative credibility. Cuarón makes use of his memory and photographic archives as an intertext to recreate exact scenes from the Corpus Christi massacre. Such recreation provides authenticity to the political and social context of the film.

To understand how this event in the film can be related to contemporary Mexican politics, The Halconazo needs to be seen as the main affair that prolonged the Dirty War between the state and several groups that disagreed with the imposed system. According to Cuarón, even the last presidential elections in Mexico, in June 2018, were a consequence of this event (*Road to*

Roma 54:27 - 55:23). What the director of *Roma* means with this, is that a political consciousness arose from this massacre, as even those who belonged to privileged positions confronted the state in search of a truthful democratic exercise. Such exercise took 47 years to be achieved, until June 2018, when Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) was elected president, despite being a left-wing politician affiliated to the Morena political party. In that sense, the left-wing opposition won for the first time in modern Mexican history. Nevertheless, AMLO's presidential period has been, so far, unstable, and has even brought some reminiscence from the oppressive years of the PRI party. An example of this is the rumour that the government had infiltrated the Women's Day protest in Mexico City (Tenahua 2020) on March 8th, 2020.

The reason for this was to cause violent disturbances to minimize the efforts of those who were asking for justice, as the country sinks in a daily sum of 10 femicides a day, according to statistics from the United Nations Organization (Xantomila 2020). The similitude between the events in *Roma* and the Women's day protest is social, political, and also exposed visually through a vandalized landscape. In both demonstrations, the landscapes of Mexico City are peacefully taken by those seeking for a change but are violently disturbed by the state. This comparison portrays landscape as part of the country's social and political transformation, in which one can subvert or restate the connotation of what it means to be Mexican. As such, politically speaking, even if a left-wing party is elected, there has not been much progress in democracy, but Mexicans continue to fight for their rights, just like in the early '70s.

2.5 Overview of *Roma*'s Landscape

At the beginning of the chapter, it was mentioned that *Roma*'s main character was the neighbourhood after which the film acquired its name. According to Aitken and Dixon, landscape can be seen as an actor; therefore, it can also be the main character in the narrative (Aitken and Dixon 2006: 329). For instance, in *Roma*, the residential area where the actions take place is always shown through long panning movements, where we follow the characters

from afar, and instead get a wider view of the streets, and cityscape. Director Alfonso Cuarón did this purposely, as he wanted to make it evident that the story is being narrated from the point of view of the universe, not from the point of view of a determined character.

Roma is a film with a well-researched portrayal of Mexico City in the 70's decade. Its photographic treatment in black and white is needed to accentuate affection towards the past, but the lack of grain and digital format is a statement of how the racial, social, and political themes of the film remain as present as ever. An example of this is brought by the emphasis on Cleo's indigenous features towards the bourgeois landscape of Roma neighbourhood, as she is the only individual with such physical characteristics, evidencing how she does not fit in this landscape and middle-class society. This trait is reinforced by the rural landscapes in which only indigenous characters interact, bringing the theme of race and class with it. *Roma* differentiates rich and poor by means of race through the representations of landscape.

Finally, *Roma* also follows a political thread, intending to portray how politics worked during the '70s, but also to contribute to the elements that have not changed throughout the years in Mexican politics. The protest that takes place during the climax of *Roma* is a historic event, represented through a painful and violent landscape, in which several dead bodies, of students, decorate the streets of Mexico. This is not alien to other recent events, such as the disappearance and assassination of 43 students, during Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency in 2014, which remains unsolved to date. On the other hand, the protest alludes to Mexicans as a politically active society, which even nowadays, peacefully manifests its disagreements and seeks the majority's best interests. *Roma* is a portrait of the Mexico of the '70s, but at the same time, it approaches a contemporary Mexican society, which continues to drown in a corrupted democracy and racial conflicts.

3. Güeros

“Mexico City has always been this big, complex monster of a city, that has always had real problems and needs” - Alejandro G. Iñárritu

3.1 Alonso Ruizpalacios' *Güeros* (2014)

Güeros (2014) by Alonso Ruizpalacios is a road film about friendship and the doubts of a young generation, with Mexico City as a common thread. According to an interview by The San Diego Union Tribune, director Alonso Ruizpalacios acknowledges the protagonism of the Mexican capital, because the city's complexity is an intrinsic part of the journey the characters undertake to find themselves (2014). *Güeros* was filmed in several places in Mexico City to display the different faces of the city, and make the audience experience the film as a road trip for the characters and themselves (Ruizpalacios 2014). With this, the message behind the cinematic landscapes of *Güeros* is directly linked to the psychology of the characters, but can also be subject to the analysis of how it modifies or reinforces societal ideas and values of the Mexican society.

Güeros portrays the bourgeois and marginalized landscapes of Mexico City. It is a film which takes place in 1999, but director Alonso Ruizpalacios makes use of several references that play with the temporality of the story. As such, the director's debut film makes a tribute to the golden age of Mexican cinema, through the music of Agustín Lara and the aesthetic of French New Wave cinema. He also brings forward the students' feeling of stagnation during 1999 in Mexico, by portraying the strike of the National Autonomous University (UNAM), and sets the film back in the present with hints in the landscape and technology. With this, the film utilizes both narrative and cinematic landscapes to highlight how history has transformed Mexican society.

This chapter will offer a detailed analysis of the cinematic landscapes of *Güeros*, studying both their influence towards understanding how Mexican society operates and their visual references to the psyche of the main characters. For instance, it will explore the transactional model and how landscapes produce meaning through cinematic techniques and the text-centred approach. The idea is to understand how the landscape in *Güeros* deepens into the themes of social class, racism, and the controversies lived by younger generations, via the portrayal of Mexico City. This is because the capital city is an active element throughout the film, whether from the window of a car, a building, or at plain sight, and it invites the viewer to visit and explore landscapes that are rather uncommon but inborn of Mexican society. According to film critic and journalist Sergio Huidobro, *Güeros*' landscape delineates a clear profile of the millennial generation, half idealistic, half apolitical, with a nostalgia for a past that is not their own (Huidobro 2014). As such, the film results in an interesting intersection between landscape and the psyche of the characters, explaining the intrinsic racism of Mexican society and its socio-political conflicts.

Before embarking into the analysis, it is essential to discuss the meaning of the title of the film, as this is crucial to the development of the story, and particularly to the racial conflicts exposed. *Güeros* is a film that continually makes jokes in regard to the character's skin colour. The protagonists are two brothers that do not look alike, mostly because one of them is dark-skinned, while the other is light-skinned. As such, there is a constant mention of the word 'güero', as a disrespectful, yet playful way to call someone white and privileged, and 'prieto' to refer to someone dark-skinned and less privileged. Throughout this chapter, the meaning of the word güero will be further explored and explained to connect the landscape with the slang used in the film.

Güeros follows the story of Tomás (Sebastián Aguirre), a young 14-year-old boy from the Mexican coast of Veracruz, facing the normal hormonal changes of adolescence and the absence of his father, who died sometime in the past. Due to Tomás's bad behaviour, his mother decides to send him to the capital with his older brother Federico (Tenoch Huerta). Federico, who is also known as Sombra ('shade' in Spanish), due to his dark skin, is studying his bachelor degree in Mexico City, but the strike involving his university (The National

Autonomous University of Mexico) leaves him stranded in an anaesthetic limbo, along with his roommate and best friend Santos (Leonardo Ortizgris). The apathy of both Sombra and Santos is exaggerated, as the two young men live in an apartment paid for by Tomás's mother, without electricity, and scarce food, because they have decided not to leave the place until the students' strike is over. Nevertheless, a few days after Tomás arrives in the capital, the brothers discover that their idol, Epigmenio Cruz, a forgotten rocker who their father used to listen to, is dying in some hospital on the outskirts of the city. Suddenly Tomás, Sombra, Santos, and Ana (Ilse Salas), an activist from the university's general committee, begin a journey through Mexico City in search of the rock legend. What they find is an endless wild city that never sleeps, and the courage to define who they are and who they want to be.

3.2 Analysing *Güeros* through the cinematic landscape

Güeros is a film that portrays the urban landscapes of Mexico City, exposing its contrasts through a timeless, yet dynamic, photography in black and white. The photographic treatment, along with the plot, makes the film feel seemingly unaffected by time, and allows the viewer to experience recognizable elements of the city, and historic moments at a certain distance. The film takes place during the not so distant past of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) strike, in 1999, which also resonates with the recent memory of protests and social movements that are a constant among Mexican society. A dual temporality is achieved by both the black and white photography, that although expressively nostalgic of the past is set in the present due to its lack of grain, and the contemporaneity of the visual landscape, as this is not alien to how Mexico City looks like today.

To analyse how *Güeros* situates the viewer in the present, despite the story taking place in the late 90s, it is important to take a closer look into the urban landscape. For instance, there is a scene in which Tomás, Sombra, and Santos are headed to the zoo to continue their search for the fictional rock legend Epigmenio Cruz. In this scene, there is a sequence in which for a

brief amount of seconds, the landscape observed through the window of the moving car does not resemble that of Mexico City in 1999, but is in fact a street with a few apparent eruptions of 21st-century architecture (*Güeros* 37:00-37:12) (See appendix B, fig. 1). This 12-second clip presents the viewer with a series of skyscraper buildings, streetlights, palm trees in the sidewalks, a 1999 Volkswagen beetle driving in the far, and traffic signs. The landscape is common to Mexico City but uncommon to the year and decade of the narrative. That, on the one hand, means that sets and locations were chosen to emphasize today's landscapes of Mexico City, while all other details such as cars, props, and costume design remain loyal to the year and decade of the narrative. As such, the film plays with the temporality of the story, utilizing landscape, making the conflicts and situations relevant to both present and past.

On the other hand, following Zonn's model of direct and indirect transactions, this 12-second sequence can also be analysed through the types of landscape portrayers and perceivers. Director Alonso Ruizpalacios is a portrayer type B because he has direct and indirect transactions with the landscape (Zonn 1984: 147). He lived in Mexico City most of his life, while at the same time, he built his image of the city through the texts, photographs, movies, and paintings of others. This is important because Ruizpalacios is the creator of the image; the perceptual filters of the audience are bound to the interpretation of his transactions with the landscape. Whether the viewer has direct transactions with Mexico City or not, the author's decision to portray a determined cityscape will create specific meanings. For example, the contemporary landscape towards the 1999 narrative indicates that the themes of the film have a presence in the present too.

In terms of how the audience is presented with the landscape, and taking myself as a subject of analysis, I am a receiver type D of Zonn's transactional model. My direct and indirect transactions with Mexico City situate me in a privileged position that allows me to identify the street depicted in the landscape (Zonn 1984: 147). I recognize the buildings and know that most of them were built between 2006 and 2009, and were finished by the end of the decade, such as the High Park Santa Fé, and Grand Santa Fé residential towers (See appendix B, fig.

2). My role as a perceiver type D allows me to interpret the landscape selected by Ruizpalacios as something alien to the temporality of the narrative, but belonging to the contemporary Mexican capital. This aligns with the concept of architecture during the 20th century in Mexico, in which its main contributors, such as Luis Barragán and Teodoro González de León, were driven by a style that reconciles the city with its colonial past, and its prehispanic roots (Vázquez 1990: 182). The types of skyscrapers observed in the sequence were not likely to exist during 1999 because, during the second half of the 20th century, Mexico had not invested in such constructions (Vázquez 1990: 183). It was not until the last 20 years of the 20th century that such projects began to emerge, although many were concretized at the beginning of the next century. Considering this, it can be said that the landscape portrayed by Ruizpalacios is even more important, as its architectural inaccuracy emphasizes the contemporary nature of the narrative and the fast and modern rhythm of Mexican society.

In contrast, a perceiver type C, for whom this landscape is the first transaction with Mexico City, the perceptual experience may vary in accordance to his or her mental construct of a city (Koeck 2013: 40). Such mental construction will be formed by the viewer's personal experiences, and therefore, transactions with urban spaces, which will linger as a filmic memory itself (Koeck 2013: 40). From this perspective, the landscape becomes a cinematic construct built upon a hybrid of the newly obtained indirect transaction with Mexico City, and the transactions with other urban spaces. As such, the architectural elements of the landscape play an essential role in allowing the viewer, who has never had a direct transaction with the Mexican capital, to appreciate the modernity implied in the landscape. If the perceiver's concept of urban space contains any transaction to 21st-century architecture, such as glass skyscrapers, with high-tech, expressive forms and resembling sculptures on an enormous scale, then this 12-second sequence of *Güeros* will also set the viewer in the present.

3.3 The Discriminatory Landscapes of Güeros

Güeros is a film that touches upon the theme of racism through the landscape of Mexico City and the usage of slang in the dialogue. When paired together, these two elements bring forward the stark contrasts and inequalities of the Mexican capital. In that sense, the road trip is a resource used to express the complicated nature of Mexican society. It is through this visual journey that the spectator becomes a witness of the many contrasting sides of the city. The purpose of this subsection is to analyse the landscape of *Güeros*, along with a few words from the dialogue, to showcase the innate racism that permeates in Mexico. This analysis will provide the viewer with an explanation of the social hierarchies and imbalances that constitute Mexican society.

As previously mentioned, there is a scene in which Sombra, Santos, and Tomás go to the zoo in hope of finding the rock legend Epigmenio Cruz there. At first, the protagonists are driving through a wealthy area surrounded by skyscrapers, but suddenly, a wrong turn takes them to a radically different place. A few minutes away from the financial district of Santa Fé, which the characters were passing by, a wrong turn allocates them in one of the poorest areas of Mexico City. This landscape is composed of small unfinished houses made of concrete, electric cables crossing from one place to another, trees, and cars (*Güeros* 00:38:25-00:38:38) (See appendix B, fig. 3). As they reach the end of the street, the characters are approached by a street gang, who refer to Sombra, Santos, and Tomás as ‘güeritos’; a term in Spanish used to refer to someone that is light-skinned (Krozer 2019). This interaction is important because the only one of the characters who is light-skinned is Tomás, but Ruizpalacios is trying to emphasize that the term is used to evoke a social class and privilege. Both landscape and dialogue are connected in this scene to confront the ever-present class conflict in Mexican society narratively.

Sombra and Santos dislike being called güeros because the official definition of the word does not fit their physical characteristics, but it is the meaning that has been attributed to the term

by Mexican society that positions the characters within this category. To the eyes of those who call them güeros, the protagonists occupy a superior social position, which, metaphorically speaking, whitens them. Within this perverse logic, a prejudiced society hides under a slang that some use as an insult, while others take it as flattery. As such, this dialogue, paired with the poverty expressed in the landscape, constitutes a transparent testimony to the racism and inequality that permeates the life of Mexico City. The word 'güero', attributed to social superiority, reveals the dynamics of hierarchies and discrimination that operate in Mexican society. The landscape guides the viewer towards the visuals of a country that portrays extreme wealth inequality, having on one side a financial district worth of any first world country, and at a wrong turn, the representation of the 41.1% of the population living in poverty (CONEVAL 2018). In this scene, landscape is needed to reinforce the meaning of the word güero; else the term would remain flat. A foreign audience requires both the visual imagery and the dialogue to comprehend the racial and social dynamics of Mexican society.

This scene is not the only one in which dialogue and landscape are placed together to emphasize some sort of discrimination or rejection within the narrative. After the protagonists manage to escape the street gang, and with the night already falling upon them, they decide to skip the zoo and visit Ana, an activist friend of Sombra and Santos, at their university UNAM. As the protagonists arrive, it is revealed the school has been taken over by students protesting against the possibility of being charged a tuition fee of 150 American dollars per semester. This would mean the end of public and accessible higher education granted to all Mexicans for the modest price of two American cents. Nevertheless, because Sombra and Santos do not take part in the protests, they are initially denied entrance to the institution by some fellow students, but they are eventually let in by an old friend, who in exchange asks for a ride to the building where the gathering is taking place. As the characters drive through the University City, which is the name given to the massive complex, the viewer is presented with different empty streets, buildings, lights, traffic signs, and parks (*Güeros* 00:48:19 - 00:49:18). There are multiple cuts between the shots of the streets, mainly used to highlight the landscape,

while the dialogue, which we witness only through sound, becomes, to a certain extent, hostile, as the characters discuss their decision to stay out of the protests.

Overall, the landscape and dialogue in this scene is the result of many decisions by the authors of the film, yet, if one reads the cinematic language, through a text-centred approach, it is possible to understand their meaning (Rapoport 1984: 56). The decision of Ruizpalacios to follow an aesthetic like that of the French New Wave, evident through the usage of jump cuts and documentary-like camera treatment, allows the viewer to take the story as personal or reflecting personal philosophies. To comply with this aesthetic, the director even utilises somewhat ambiguous dialogue, in which the characters step out of their roles, and ponder about the relevance of the film screenplay. Accompanying this dialogue is an odd shot of the clapperboard, symbolizing that this scene is somewhat outside of the film universe. The editing, and lack of continuity in the landscape, which jumps from one street to another, together with the camera treatment, breakage of the fourth wall, and hostile dialogue, establish a relationship with the viewer that is rather intimate, reflecting the politics and philosophy of the characters.

Following Robin Flowerdew's and David M. Martin's processes to develop a textual analysis (1997: 266), the landscape of this scene turns into a rather dark space, in which the audience is forced to observe only what Sombra and Santos can see from the front seats of the car. The streets are empty, accentuating the void the characters are experiencing due to the strike, which, despite having a purpose, has left no space for those who are caught in the middle of this conflict. The darkness reveals the place as a mournful space, and the lack of continuity from one street to another represents not only the enormous size of the University City but also the long and out of focus road the protest has taken. Some are fighting for the right to continue having a financially accessible superior education, while others prolong the strike with unnecessary demands that keep the school out of service for a year. On the other hand, through the dialogue, the characters are being called 'esquirols', a demeaning term in Spanish to call those who are strike-breakers, and therefore against a given social movement. This

word is yet another resource used in the film to evidence that Sombra, Santos, and Tomás do not fit in. They are being discriminated against for not taking part in the protests, just as much as they were placed in the privileged position of a güero by the street gang, simply because they belong to the middle class. The dialogue, along with the landscape emphasizes how the characters are being left estranged from their own universe because they do not share the same philosophies as the majority. This is important, because the film is a road trip throughout Mexico City, exploring not only its different cultural and societal approaches, but undertaking, along with the protagonists, an adventure to discover who they are and where they belong.

Soon after this sequence, the protagonists enter the building where the strike gathering is taking place. Inside, they find Ana, who is in front of a demanding audience, making a speech on how to handle the protest. She is, nevertheless, disrespected by the majority and booed out of the podium. The audience calls her classist, and they lessen her initial position as a strong woman by asking her to take off her clothes. Sombra, who is in love with Ana, responds to this aggressive exchange of arguments with yet another word that creates an invisible line between him and the strikers. He calls them ‘nacos’, a term in Spanish used to describe classless, pretentious, uneducated people. It can be applied to a poor or wealthy person equally if such a person has no respect for the rules. From this scene, it is evident that Ana is not seen as the movement leader she claims to be and that Sombra, Santos, and Tomás are actively involved in the imaginary discriminatory social lines that constitute Mexican society.

After Ana leaves the stage, she introduces Sombra, Santos, and Tomás to the different sections of the building, which is divided by students inhabiting the classrooms in accordance with the school department where they belong. Some have mattresses, while others sleep on the floor, and there is a common area serving food for everyone. She works in the radio channel that operates from inside the same building, but the lack of interaction among her and the other persons taking part in the strike is a statement of how, despite being part of the movement, she does not quite fit in.

The scene's importance is due to the contrast it represents in comparison to the landscape of the previous sequence. After having shown us the empty, mournful outside of the university, Ruizpalacios brings the viewer to the interior of the building. Here, the mise-en-scene accentuates the difference between the emptiness of the outside landscape and the life happening inside (See appendix B, fig. 4 and 5). The bright lights of the camping area in the hallways and rooms filled with books and people are opposed to the dark solitaire streets the characters were driving through a few minutes before. Such contrast matters because it confirms that the protagonists are allocated in a position that fits neither the outside landscape nor the interior. On the one hand, the landscape sequence evidences the void the strike represents, while the inside one exhibits the loud and unorganized movement they reject. The contrast between empty and full, silence, and noise accentuate the in-the-middle position of the characters. This, paired with the words *esquiroles*, *classist*, and *naco*, brings forward the social concerns of the film. Ruizpalacios exposes the invisible lines of discrimination that permeate in Mexican society through visuals and dialogue.

The next scene where the landscape is used to portray the contrasts of Mexico City occurs when Sombra, Santos, Tomás, and Ana, decide to spend the night downtown inside the car. During this scene, the streets are empty, all the shops are closed, and darkness takes over the landscape; except for the streetlights partially illuminating the sidewalks. Then, Ruizpalacios abruptly cuts to the morning shot. The daylight over Sombra's head is the first indication of contrast; the darkness is gone, a new day begins, and with daybreak, the city recovers its life. The empty street next to their parked car has turned into one of the informal markets that arise in Mexico City every day. They are trapped between the merchants' stands, and a blinding white light takes over the landscape (*Güeros* 01:14:18-01:16:26) (See Appendix B, fig. 6 and 7). The landscape differs from the previous one immensely, despite it being the same street, and as such, it plays a vital role in the portrayal of the class division tied to racial prejudice. For instance, following Robin Flowerdew's and David M. Martin's textual analysis on how geographers read landscape metaphors, the cityscape on this scene of *Güeros* can be understood as a representation of dark and light-skinned persons, and the mutual dissociation

it exists between them. It works as a reference to the word *güeros*, and supports the social tension that has been exposed throughout the film.

In an interview by writer and film industry expert Sydney Levine, Alonso Ruizpalacios commented that it is hard to make a film about Mexico City without portraying the existing class differences, classism, and racism. According to Ruizpalacios, this is often not as evident as in other countries, like in the United States, because Mexico has, supposedly, reached a certain level of equality. This statement is not only false, as there is still a lot of social tension, but dealing with it has become a sensitive topic, because Mexicans do not accept it and rather hide it through language and other invisible borders (Levine 2016). The landscape of this scene can be interpreted exactly as a subtle hint of such racism, which, although hidden, is impossible not to notice.

3.4 Hidden Politics in *Güeros*' Landscape

As said before, the road trip the quartet undertakes to find the rock legend Epigmeneo Cruz is a device that allows for the characters' self-discovery, but it is also a visual composition that helps understand the complicated nature of Mexican society. Other Mexican films, such as *Tú Mamá También* (Alfonso Cuarón 2001), have followed the same road trip premise, throughout the country, to expose the social contrasts of Mexico. But what differentiates Ruizpalacios' film is that he demonstrates that there is no need for a journey through the whole country to talk about class struggle and social construction of Mexico, as this can be explored within the confinements of one city. An example of this occurs during the last part of the trip, where the characters navigate through the periphery, which crosses all of Mexico City, and Ana abruptly decides to turn the car off in the middle of the road, causing a traffic jam (*Güeros* 1:28:35-01:29:03). During this shot, the camera gradually moves away from the car, making visible the chaotic cityscape, as the vial congestion increases (See appendix B, fig. 8). This is accompanied by a loud, almost annoying soundscape of car riders honking their horns, that gets louder by the second, but which does not make the protagonists move.

This landscape, composed of a congested road, may be seen as a metaphor. The traffic jam attracts other cars by involving them in a more extensive system than the ones created by their intentions or decisions. Cars that otherwise would continue moving in a better-distributed space and faster pace are forced to stop by the decision of a single driver to park in the middle of the road. This is metaphoric of three things. Firstly, Sombra and Santos' position regarding the UNAM strike, which forced them to pause their studies involuntarily. Secondly, and although Ruizpalacios never expressly says during the film that the year of the narrative is 1999, this can be assumed based on historical facts; the landscape can be read as a metaphor of the authoritarian political regime that ruled the country from 1929 to 2000. This is because Mexicans, as objects of a faulty democratic system, were forced to follow the structure imposed by a few, without being able to freely choose how they want to be governed. Thirdly, considering the film was produced during the year 2014, in a similar way to *Roma*, this landscape can also be an allusion to the return of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2012 with president Enrique Peña Nieto. This comparison stems from how many Mexicans saw the return of the PRI as a comeback of the old authoritarian system, mostly because the election process was "tainted by claims of vote-buying" (Miroff and Booth 2012), a strategy that the party had also used in the past.

Finally, as the movie ends, the characters have a rather disappointing encounter with the rock legend, which signifies that what mattered from this search was the road and not the destination. As stated by director Alonso Ruizpalacios, "before the journey, the characters were trapped in a limbo of inactivity and routine, it is only when they go out and discover new things that their lives improve" [...] "One of the central themes of the film is the change from being static to being in movement, of healing through movement" (Ruizpalacios 2016). With this in mind, the protagonists undertake a new trip back home. On their way, they find themselves trapped in the middle of a student protest. The streets are overrun by young people carrying signs and flags, shops close, and cars are stopped on the roads. This scene also contains a rather important soundscape, in which the noise of the protest is diminished by the

non-diegetic sound of drums (*Güeros* 01:43:21-01:44:37). This scene's aural landscape is relevant because it alludes to the fight and struggle Mexicans undertake to demand change.

The landscape previously described, alludes to both the theme of movement in the film, and the actively engaged society that arose in Mexico after the social changes in 1968. Ruizpalacios understands that regardless of the political party that is ruling the country, it is through action and personal effort that a difference can be made. Sombra, Santos, Tomás, and Ana's lives changed when they stepped out of their routine. The same happens with the protests that are a constant in Mexican society; because of them, many things have changed. For example, the political party PRI lost its first election in 71 years in June 2000, and the university UNAM reached an agreement that allows the school to offer higher education at very low cost to date. These are only a few examples of what being in motion can bring, but as such, this last chaotic landscape symbolizes that movement is an intrinsic part of Mexican society, and how it heals and improves, even when the conditions are not in its favour.

3.5 Overview of *Güeros*' landscape

This chapter offered an analysis of *Güeros*' cinematic landscapes through the transactional model and the process of reading geographic metaphors. Both the theory of transactionalism, and the text-centred approach allow for a deeper understanding of the landscapes portrayed in the film, and therefore, of the society they represent. Tim Cresswell and Deborah Dixon define the study of landscapes in films as temporary embodiments of social processes that construct and deconstruct the world as we know it (2002: 4). *Güeros*' representation of Mexico City conveys a compelling description, not only of the place *per se*, but also of the social and political structure of Mexico.

As seen throughout the chapter, the photographic treatment in black and white makes the film somewhat nostalgic, but the lack of grain and the modern portrayal of Mexico City's landscape continuously set the film in the present. This plays with the temporality of the

narrative; it makes historic moments, such as the UNAM strike in 1999, distant and contemporary at the same time. This is a resource used to emphasize that the themes the film touches upon are not outdated, but something that continues to exist even today.

On the other hand, the narrative exposes the discriminatory and racist nature of Mexican society through the usage of slang words in the dialogues and contrasting landscapes. *Güeros* is a film that pairs diminishing words, daily used in Mexican vocabulary, side by side with the marginalized and wealthy landscapes of Mexico City. It is a film that exposes that, in Mexico, being white is not only a matter of skin colour, but of social position. There is no place for those who do not fit the already established categories, and therefore, everyone is subject to discrimination. The issues of class and race are not only tackled through dialogue, but also through landscape, as it is the surroundings where the actions take place, the ones that portray the extreme contrasts.

Lastly, the film also uses landscapes as metaphors to portray the political stagnation of a country, whose democratic system has failed, forcing them to follow the rules and steps of a few. As such, the only option Mexican society has had, for several decades, is to demand better political practices through social movements such as strikes and protests. *Güeros* is a film that embraces that only by constantly being in motion can life change, either on a personal or societal level. So, although the film confronts Mexico's social and political conflicts, it also leaves room for change, portraying movement as a solution. Overall, the landscape of this film describes Mexican society at different levels, and it plays an essential role because it reinforces the narrative and dialogue, allowing both local and foreign audiences to formulate or identify elements of Mexicaness.

4. Differences and Similarities in Mexico's City Landscape Portrayal in *Roma* and *Güeros*

"It is place, permanent position in both the social and topographical sense, that gives us our identity." - J. B. Jackson

4.1 Comparative approach

One of the common elements between *Roma* (2018) by Alfonso Cuarón, and *Güeros* (2014) by Alonso Ruizpalacios, is Mexico City. Both stories take place in the Mexican capital and use its landscape to bring forward social and political themes. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the similarities and differences of *Roma* and *Güeros* portrayal of Mexico's City landscape, to analyze how this geographic component modifies, creates, or reinforces concepts of Mexicaness. The concern of this chapter is with the geography of film continuum and the portrayal of Mexican society; to study the interrelations between landscape and social representations in *Roma* and *Güeros*. In both films, the way places are represented reflects existent cultural norms, ethical conventions, societal structures, and ideologies of Mexico, but the approach in which this is done varies from one film to the other. The analysis will expose *Roma* and *Güeros* contrasts and similarities using the postmodern social theory of the geography continuum, as well as the text centre approach. This will lead to the ultimate goal of identifying how landscapes in these two films produce meaning and expose a determined idea of Mexicanness.

According to the postmodern social theory used in the film of geography continuum, "to represent is to portray clearly before the mind, to give back to society an image of itself" (Aitken and Zonn 1994: 6). Among other things, representation strengthens a set of social structures that help individuals make sense of their surroundings. Following this, geographers have begun to examine representations of, and the meanings attached to landscapes in films,

understanding that cinematic landscapes, and whatever action is happening in them, are formed as much by the images of the authors and viewers, as of their identities (Aitken and Zonn 1994: 6). This means that both *Roma* and *Güeros* landscapes are composed of the images and identities of Alfonso Cuarón and Alonso Ruizpalacios, respectively, but that the viewer's images and identity also play a role in how the landscapes are perceived. Identity creates an understanding of the race, gender, social status, nationality, among other elements that individuals feel related to, or belong to. This, along with the possibility of reading the film landscape by means of the text-centred approach, which assumes that landscapes function as a system of signification that can be interpreted, makes it possible to analyze how *Roma* and *Güeros* explore the meaning of Mexicaness through landscape.

4.2 Class and Race in *Roma* and *Güeros*

Roma and *Güeros* expose the perverse relationship between race and class in Mexico, through the usage of landscape, but they do not do it in the same way. Both films have different elements, such as camera movements, sound design, editing, and dialogues, that help highlight the function of landscape as an exhibitor of the innate racism in Mexican society. For instance, *Roma* brings up racial conflicts by using prolonged uninterrupted shots that follow the characters at a certain distance, allowing the viewer to receive as much information of the landscape and situations as possible. In addition to these types of shots, *Roma* possesses an immersive sound design that although not accompanied by a score, uses its naturalistic style to help the viewer create social, cultural and political associations. As such, the combination of sound and visual landscape accurately supports the racism theme that Alfonso Cuarón intended to portray (*Road to Roma* 2020).

As previously mentioned in chapter 2.0, one of these examples is when Cleo goes through the bourgeoisie neighbourhood Roma, running behind one of the children of the family that employs her. The camera follows Cleo with a slow panning movement, allowing the audience to fully observe the landscape's houses, shops, and restaurants. This scene, accompanied by

the soundscape, composed of the sounds of cars, residents talking to veterinarians after taking their dog to consultation, and the whistle of the traffic police, hints the viewer into understanding this as a bourgeois cityscape. Nevertheless, what makes this scene an accurate portrayal of how racism operates in Mexico, is that Cleo's indigenous features do not fit in the landscape. While she is running, we notice that Cleo is the only person interacting in this landscape that possesses such characteristics. This marks a difference between her and the inhabitants of Roma neighbourhood and demonstrates the existing relationship between class and race in Mexico.

This parallel is revisited in a scene, where Cleo arrives at the neighbourhood where her boyfriend Fermín lives. Here, opposite to the scene described in the previous paragraph, all the persons interacting in the scene have indigenous traits. The landscape also differs immensely, houses are made of trash, there is no pavement, and electric cables hang everywhere in a sign that electricity has been recently installed. As for the aural landscape, this one announces that there are several radios turned on, a political propaganda show happening somewhere in the background, and pigs running around. Once again, the slow panning movement allows the audience to be aware of the details in the landscape. This, paired with the sound design and the physical features of the characters interacting, Cleo included, illustrates the inequalities of Mexican society, in which indigenous race is almost a synonym of poor or low class.

Güeros, on the other hand, positions the camera to make it seem like we are observing the cinematic universe through the eyes of the character of Tomás. The film shots are short, and the continuity is, sometimes, affected by jump cuts. Opposite to *Roma*, *Güeros* does have a soundtrack, but the themes of race and class are brought up mainly by a combination of Mexican slang and landscape, and not so much through the soundscape. An example of this, which has been analyzed in chapter 3.0, is when Sombra, Santos, and Tomás find themselves in an impoverished neighbourhood, and a street gang ambushes them. Among other things, the gang mocks the protagonists by calling them güeros, alluding to their privileged social position. As previously explained, güero is a word used in Mexico to refer to a person with

white skin, but it has a second connotation, in which the one being called güero is assumed to belong to a higher social class, even if their skin is not white, because their social status metaphorically whitens them (Krozer 2019). Therefore, the usage of this word, side by side with the physical characteristics of the landscape, brings up the conflict of class division and racism in Mexico. It makes it clear that Mexican society associates white with higher social class, both literally and metaphorically, while also highlighting the enormous inequality in the country.

Another way in which *Güeros* addresses the issues of race and class is by using high contrasts in the same landscapes. There is a scene in which the three protagonists and Ana are sleeping inside the car in the middle of a street. During the night, the street is dark, empty, and dirty, then it abruptly cuts to the morning, and the street is almost unrecognizable. A market has taken over the landscape, and everything is full of life and light. Following Robin Flowerdew and David M. Martin's textual analysis on how geographers read landscape metaphors (1997: 19), this specific scene can be understood as a metaphor of what it means to be dark- or light-skinned in Mexico. It is a reference to the social categories imposed by Mexican society, and a representation of the dissociation among such categories.

With these two examples, it is clear that *Roma* and *Güeros* use landscapes as geographic stereotypes (Burgess and Gold 1985: 10). This, because the distinctive features of a determined landscape are used to give identity to the protagonists. In both films, the different elements of the landscapes define the social class of the characters and allocate them in a given position. For example, *Roma* is directly pointing to the fact that indigenous people belong to an impoverished landscape. This is achieved by creating a dissociation between Cleo's race and the landscape of the bourgeois neighbourhood, and an association between the indigenous race and a bankrupt landscape. On the other hand, and even though *Güeros* utilizes language as a backup to the landscape, the marginal cityscape in which the protagonists encounter the street gang, still defines the identity of the characters. The impoverished landscape is home to the band that attacks Sombra, Santos, and Tomás. From the beginning of

the scene, it is evident that the protagonists are uncomfortable in this new landscape and atmosphere, but the street gang is comfortable. The visual bankruptcy of the cityscape, along with the usage of the word *güero*, creates an association between the marginal landscape and the street gang, and a dissociation between the protagonists and the landscape. As such, their identities through social status are settled through a geographic stereotype.

Following the postmodern social theory used in the film geography continuum, the behaviour we have in accordance with the information obtained in film and other media may have a social impact (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 39). Having this in mind, the representations of class and race of Mexico, that both *Roma* and *Güeros* portray, can become models for social interaction and place experience (Aitken and Zonn 1993: 6). As such, the audience receiving these representations, might not only become aware of the racism and inequality that permeate in Mexico, but can be impacted on how they understand Mexican society, and experience Mexico City as a place. This is important for the goal of this research, as it means that landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros* can create, mould, or modify preconceived ideas about Mexico and its society. The film's landscapes expose the abysmal gap between wealth and poverty that exists in Mexico, and the racial and class conflicts that arise from such a gap. Consequently, *Roma* and *Güeros* define Mexico's social ladder, by means of landscape, and offer the viewer either an understanding of Mexican culture that might not have been exposed to them before, or a reinforcement of the already obtained cultural conception.

4.3 Politics in *Roma* and *Güeros*

Roma and *Güeros* are two films that explore the political aspects of Mexico. *Roma*, on the one hand, has a more direct political approach by following the historic events that took place during the summer of 1971, such as the Corpus Christi massacre. While *Güeros* tackles the issue from a more indirect point of view, using metaphors and references to the importance of remaining in motion to demand and achieve better political circumstances. As stated before, *Roma* takes place during the 1970s, and *Güeros* is implied, though never truly revealed, to be

narrated during the year 1999, throughout the strike of the national university UNAM. Nevertheless, the political themes they both address can be said to be relevant and even accurate to Mexico's current situation. Both films portray a society politically active, always protesting and demanding of their rights, and they both make allusions to the government corruption, and how Mexican society has fought back the system.

According to director Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* is a window towards what has and has not changed in Mexico (Cuarón 2019). Following this idea, the landscape in the film is used to portray the political reality of Mexico, both during the 1970s and in present times. For instance, several scenes hint the audience about the political party governing the country, PRI, and its tactics used to rule. This is relevant because the same political party was in power during both the year of the narrative in 1971, and the film's production in 2016-2017. *Roma* makes use of resources such as pamphlets, sound, or dead bodies in the landscape to bring forward how the PRI party operated not only during the 70s but also during its most recent government period, from 2012 to 2018.

An example of this, and which has been further explored in chapter 2.0, is when Cleo is having a day off, and the street she is running through, which belongs to a popular neighbourhood, is upholstered in propagandistic posters from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). A second example is when she visits the marginal town where Fermín lives, in which the soundscape brings an entertainment show with people clapping and thanking the government of Luis Echeverría. These two scenes' landscapes and soundscapes oppose the ones in the Roma neighbourhood, where no visual or aural political propaganda is presented. This can be interpreted as the PRI party appealing to the poor by giving them entertainment and goods in exchange for votes, something the middle and higher social classes won't follow through with. As such, *Roma* exposes the perverse reality of Mexico in which charming the poor is a good political strategy, because they constitute a very high percentage of the population (CONEVAL 2018), and which results in a faulty democracy.

Roma also closely follows the Corpus Christi massacre, which was a statement of how the PRI party operated when the people, in this case students, disagreed with the government. This massacre, which remains unpunished to date, because there was insufficient evidence against president Luis Echeverría, was not the last time a crime of such nature occurred. In September 2014, during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto, 43 students were murdered, under false allegations that they belonged to organized crime. As such, the landscapes of Mexico have been burdened with the laying bodies of innocents both in 1971 and in contemporary years.

On the other hand, and contrary to *Roma*, *Güeros* does not have a direct political event taking part in the plot; instead, it has several elements that underline the importance of a politically active society. As one example, there is a scene in which the protagonists stop in the middle of the road, causing a vial congestion. As analysed in chapter 3.0, by means of the text-centred approach, this landscape, composed of a view of the road and the hundreds of cars being held in the traffic, can have a political connotation. In a country where the democratic election continuously failed, allowing the PRI party to rule for 71 consecutive years (Martinez 2005: 50), this landscape brings forward the fact that the decisions imposed by a few affect the whole country, which is forced to advance at the speed the government chooses. Nevertheless, as the end of the film approaches, there is yet another traffic congestion, this time caused by a students' protest. The meaning here changes, as according to director Alonso Ruizpalacios, he intended to portray how Mexicans create societal change and demand better government through social movements (Ruizpalacios 2016).

Following this analysis, *Roma* and *Güeros* are addressing the same political issues. Both films are attacking the imposed regime by the political party PRI, and they are both praising the fact that Mexicans have found a way to demand justice and their rights through social movements. The landscapes are crucial to confront political topics in these films. In *Roma*, the landscape points directly to the impoverished and popular neighbourhoods like those mostly affected by political propaganda, demonstrating that the government follows a *panem et circenses* strategy that would not work with upper classes. It also demonstrates how Mexico's landscapes have

been disrupted by the deaths of innocent citizens, which modifies the streets entirely. Fear empties the stores and roads, and the void is seen in the landscape, just as it is felt by those losing loved ones. In *Güeros*, it is through landscape that the viewer understands how the Mexican government operates by, metaphorically speaking, imposing a designated driving speed. It also portrays landscapes being modified by protests, which allude to the importance of social movements in Mexico, and the overall theme of motion to make a change.

According to postmodern social theorists such as Aitken, Zonn and Jameson, films have transformed society into a dramaturgical one, in which viewers know themselves only through their representations in audiovisual culture. This means that film audiences form an opinion of their social interactions and place relationships against media representations, which can cause daily behaviour to change. As such, the audience ends up incorporating what they see in films to their real lives, becoming a product of the representation itself (Kennedy and Lukinbeal 1997: 39). Following this concept, it can be said that the political implications of the landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros*, may have a direct impact on the viewers, who, with the information received, can form an opinion of Mexico's societal and political conflicts. This also opens the possibility of the audience incorporating what they see in the film to their lives, embracing a dislike or like towards specific political groups in Mexico, and constructing a political knowledge of the country. This confirms the fundamental premise of this thesis, which seeks to analyze the role cinematic landscapes have in *Roma* and *Güeros*, in moulding or modifying preconceived ideas of Mexicaness. Audiences will form a determined opinion of Mexico's politics, against the political aspects represented in the landscapes of *Roma* and *Güeros*, which can change or restate their preconceived ideas of the country's politics, and later, their behaviours in real life.

Conclusion

Throughout this research paper, the central area of study used to read and interpret the cinematic landscapes of *Roma* (2018) and *Güeros* (2014), was the subdiscipline film geography. This field of study approaches film representations of landscape through a subjective-individual perspective, and through the study of language, to understand how human actions, interactions and societal concepts change, in accordance to the cinematic landscape representation. Therefore, two of the main elements of the film geography studies, broadly used in this thesis, are the concepts of transactionalism and postmodernism in terms of cinematic landscapes. A third element widely explored was the text-centre approach as a semiotic method to decode cinematic landscapes. And lastly, this paper also took into account, although briefly, the effects of photographic treatment, and camera movement in relation to how it modifies or influences the landscape.

Proving or denying the premise that cinematic landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros* have a role in moulding and modifying preconceived ideas of Mexican culture and society requires a crucial step back to interpret the results of the analysed films. Firstly, the concept of transactionalism, referring to a series of ongoing transactions between persons and environments (Aitken 1991: 107), which constitutes a way to understand how viewers create their own visual conception of the world. This conception is built through direct and indirect transactions with landscapes. When talking about films that follow a realistic plot and pretend to be visually accurate, such as *Roma* and *Güeros*, if the viewer finds landscape transactions to be inaccurate, in comparison to their own conception of the world, it will be problematic. Viewers need to believe the places are as true to reality as possible; otherwise, all the other themes that follow, such as politics and social construct, will be diminished in value.

Roma and *Güeros* are two films whose authors were born and raised in Mexico City, which means they have direct and indirect transactions with the depicted landscapes. Both Alfonso

Cuarón and Alonso Ruizpalacios used their personal experiences and the information received by others about the city to reconstruct the landscapes of Mexico City. This means that an audience that has direct and indirect transactions with the Mexican capital will determine whether they accept the landscape as true or not, taking into account their own transactions and conception of Mexico City. Audiences that do not have direct transactions with Mexico City, meaning that they have never personally seen the Mexican capital; their intake of the landscape will be directly linked to whether or not they believe this is how Mexico City looks like. In this case, other indirect transactions come into play, as well as mental constructs of what a city looks like (Koeck 2013: 40). This means that a viewer's existing reference towards an urban landscape can and will affect the process of accepting the cinematic representation of Mexico City as true or not. This is important, because the first step towards a cinematic landscape being able to create or modify any preconceived societal ideas and values of Mexico, is dependent on the viewer acknowledging the landscape as real. During the analysis, it was seen and established how *Roma* and *Güeros* landscapes are accepted as true.

Another area of study used throughout this research to analyze cinematic landscapes is the text-centred approach. According to several scholars of the film geography subdiscipline, such as Robin Flowerdew, David M. Martin, Deborah Dixon, Tim Cresswell, and Chris Lukinbeal, film landscape can be read as texts. Therefore, if one understands the context, cinematic landscapes can be considered a system of signification that can be interpreted. In order to decode a cinematic landscape, the analysis of factors such as the historical context, or the personal vision of the author is needed. For such reasons, in both *Roma* and *Güeros* the analysis brings forward the documented facts of the time period of during which the plot takes place, and the perspectives of Alfonso Cuarón, and Alonso Ruizpalacios, respectively.

As a result, in *Roma*, the violation of the residential neighbourhood landscape by a military marching band is a metaphor towards the political and social forces coming together, at a time, where neither one of them acknowledge it. In regard to the comments made by Alfonso Cuarón in the documentary *Road to Roma* (2020), he states that he was constantly trying to

hint the audience about how the government was about to directly attack the middle-class. According to Cuarón, this is important because it was something unprecedented in the period of the narrative, but that nevertheless led to consequences even in the present time. On the other hand, *Güeros* has several metaphors in relation to what it means to be static, because director Alonso Ruizpalacios, wanted motion to be one of the main themes of the film. In order to achieve this, the usage of metaphors referring to the void feeling that the lack of movement has brought to the lives of the protagonists is set in the landscape. An example of this is when Tomás, Santos, and Sombra go to visit their university UNAM, where the landscape is dark and empty. This is again referenced in the scene in which the characters stop in the middle of the road, causing traffic congestion, which is symbolic of two things, firstly of the blockage that being static brings, and secondly, of the politics of the era, when democracy was an unknown term in Mexico.

The textual analysis of *Roma's* and *Güeros'* cinematic landscapes allows us to understand the historical, political, and social context of the stories. With this, audiences can formulate an image of what it means to be Mexican. For instance, there is a recurring political theme circulating the landscape, either literally or metaphorically, portraying oppressive systems, that both films confronted through social movements. This can produce an idea of Mexican society as an active participant in the country's political conflicts and define a certain characteristic of what it means to be Mexican. As such, the premise of the thesis is reinforced, as landscapes create or modify ideas of Mexicaness.

In terms of the postmodern approach of the film geography subdiscipline, this one follows the idea that human behaviour is likely to change according to the information received through film and other media, which in turn has a social impact. As such, taking into account the portrayal of racial and class conflicts that *Roma* and *Güeros* address through landscape, viewers can be directly impacted. Both films use cinematic landscape to evidence the wealth gap of the country; *Roma* does it by placing marginal or bourgeois neighbourhoods along characters with certain physical features, while *Güeros* brings forward marginal landscapes

side by side with particular slang words. Therefore, landscape is used and needed to underline the importance of skin colour in regard to class, and both films end up portraying how the social ladder works in Mexico. This can create, or modify a preconceived idea of Mexicans, who: are usually not believed to be racist (Krozer 2019); but who hide this characteristic under fake fraternal love (Cuarón 2019); or determined hurtful and diminishing words (Ruizpalacios 2016). Understanding the innate racism of Mexican culture is a rupture towards Hollywood stereotypes. The subject of racism is usually from American to Mexican and not Mexican to Mexican (Blakemore 2017), and it has an impact on how viewers perceive and understand the culture.

On a different matter, there is one resource that both *Roma* and *Güeros* make use of, which has a direct impact on how the audience understands the landscape. This resource is the photographic treatment in black and white, but without grain. The relevance of this element is that, according to both authors, there was no better way to stress the fact that the narratives are relevant to the time period of the plot and the present. The idea was not to make films that appeared to be produced in the past. There was a need to showcase nostalgia to an era and a determined historic moment, but there was also the need to allocate the viewer in the present. This is very important in terms of how it affects the goal of this thesis, as it means that landscape, and the themes it carries along, such as the social structure, racism, and politics can be associated with contemporary Mexican society.

On the other hand, there are specific ways in which *Roma* and *Güeros* use different types of camera movements and editing resources, that also impact the meaning of the landscapes, and therefore, how the films are interpreted by the viewers. For instance, *Roma* is narrated utilizing prolonged shots through panning movements, which helps the viewer take as much information as possible from the landscape and the actions taking place in the landscape. This works very well to contextualize the viewer, not only in the timeframe of the plot, but also in terms of how Mexican society operates. Opposite to *Roma*, *Güeros* has concise shots that quickly jump from one another, revealing the motion theme Ruizpalacios wanted to highlight.

This type of editing evokes a mood and creates a sense of unrest. Nevertheless, this resource is used only to cut from one landscape to another, and no real action is occurring; therefore, the audience continues to receive information from the different landscapes, while the jump cut manipulates their feelings and sensations.

These preceding paragraphs have brought up a summary of the analysis performed to the landscapes of *Roma* and *Güeros*, and have pointed towards why the film geography subdiscipline, through its transactional, postmodern, and semiotic theories, is useful to explicate cinematic landscapes. With this, it has been proven that cinematic landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros* do not only function as a space of entertainment, because they have elements that describe not only a place but the social construction of Mexico. Also, landscapes in both films cannot be assumed as objective documentations of the real space because they are representations built upon the authors' notions and identity. Cinematic landscapes in *Roma* and *Güeros* are an ideologically charged place that sustains determined societal ideas, values and roles of Mexico, which influence the audience, and can mould or modify its conception of Mexicaness.

The landscapes representations of Mexico City in *Roma* and *Güeros* are a window to understand Mexican culture, history, and society, because beyond acting as a place where the action takes place, they explore, either literally or metaphorically, racial, social, and political themes. As such, this research has allowed the study of other cultures and societies through the representations of cinematic landscapes. The film geography subdiscipline is a start to better read and comprehend landscapes, and to bring forward the capacity they may have in other films to break Hollywood stereotypes, and achieve different interpretations that will modify how audiences perceive others. By using landscape to narrate social, ethical, and political conflicts of a given culture, viewers can modify stereotyped opinions, which in return will change their behaviour. If audiences are capable of reshaping already-formed conceptions by means of cinematic landscapes, there is room to study this phenomenon not only in already

existing films, but also in scripts that are yet to be produced, allowing them the advantage of knowing how to induce a social change.

Kokkuvõte Eesti Keeles

Käesoleva lõputöö “**Filmide maastikud kui ühiskondlike normide ning väärtuste kujundajad ja lammutajad. Mängufilmide *Roma* (2018) ja *Güeros* (2014) analüüs**” peamiseks eesmärgiks on mõista filmide maastike rolli arvamuste ja eelarvamuste kujunemisel Mehhiko ühiskonna ja selles peituvate sotsiaalsete mõistete ja väärtuste suhtes, analüüsides mängufilme *Roma* (2018) ja *Güeros* (2014). Filmigeograafia alal leiduvate teooriate abil saab analüüsida neis mängufilmides kajastatud erinevaid maastikke ja olustikke.

Filmigeograafia on filmiõppe haru, mis käsitleb filme nii kultuurilise väärtusega tekstina ja ka eraldiseisva kultuuriväärtusena. See vaatleb maastike kajastamist läbi mitme vaatenurga. Näiteks subjektiiv-individuaalsed vaatenurgad ja keeleteadus, mis aitavad paremini mõista inimese tegevusi ja suhestumist tema keskkonnaga (Lukinbeal ja Zimmermann 2006: 315). Essees “*Introduction: Engaging Film*” [Sissejuhatus: Sisenemine filmi] (2002), märkisid geograafid Tim Cresswell ja Deborah Dixon, et filmigeograafia lähenemine mängufilmide analüüsimisele ei kajasta filme “kujutistena meelega vahetus väljenduses, kuid pigem ühiskondlike protsesside ajutise kehastusena, mis pidevalt ehitavad ja lahkavad meid ümbritsevat maailma” (2002: 4). Selle lähenemise kaudu võimaldab filmigeograafia meil kahelda sellise väljenduse võimuse ja ideoloogias ning juhib meid läbi filmi ja seda saatvate geograafiliste omaduste suhte. See võimaldab näha filmide maastike olulisust ühiskondlike standardite ja väärtuste kujunemisel ning arenemisel.

Käesolev uurimistöö kasutab filmigeograafia kontinuumi, mille kaks poolt on transaktsionalism ja postmodernism; ning semiootikat seletamaks, kuidas kinomaastikud on ideoloogilise laenguga, toetamaks ja õõnestamaks ühiskondlikke ideid, väärtusi ja rolle. Käesoleva lõputöö jaoks kasutame transaktsionalismi teoreetilise alusena, mis uurib isiku ja ümbruse vastastikust mõju. Postmodernismi peamine roll on uurida sotsiaalteooriat, mis keskendub individuaali raamivatele ja mõjutavatele struktuuridele ja ideoloogiatele (Kennedy

ja Lukinbeal 1997: 37). Kasutades neid kahte raamistikku, püüab see kontinuum koondada individuaalsed mõtted ja teod, ning ühiskondlikud struktuurid ja väärtused, mis suunavad neid mõtteid ja tegusid.

Teine lähenemine *Roma* ja *Güeros*'e maastike analüüsimiseks on semiootika. Kasutades semiootilist tekstipõhist lähenemist, on võimalik mõista kuidas filmide maastikud loovad sotsiaalseid ja kultuurilisi arusaamasid. Tekstipõhise lähenemise peamine roll käesoleva uurimistöo koostamisel on aidata *Roma* ja *Güeros*'e maastike poolt vihjatud metafooride tähendust lahti mõtestada. Niiviisi saab selgeks, et teostes kasutatud filmidetailid, näiteks kaamera liikumine ja kaadrinurgad, ei olnud juhuslikult valitud, vaid nende eesmärk oli luua maastikku rohkem tähendust - seeläbi luues täpsema tähenduse ka Mehhiko ühiskonna lahtimõtestamisel.

Filmide maastikud loovad keeruka sümbioosi nähtavatest, kuuldavatest ja liikuvaest omadustest, mis võimaldab individuaalset tõlgendust ja kultuurilist mõistmist. *Roma* puhul keskendub analüüs peamiselt helilisele ja visuaalsele maastikule, kaameratööle ning maastikust vihjatud metafooridele. *Güeros*'e puhul on helimaastik pidevas muutumises läbi mittediegeetilise muusika ja järsu vaikuse, visuaalset maastikku saadab kodeeritud kultuuriline keel; võimendades maastiku mõju, kui seda saadab hoolikalt valitud släng.

Selle lõputöö struktuur jaguneb neljaks peatükiks: esimene peatükk seletab teoreetilist raamistikku; teine ja kolmas peatükk on vastavalt mängufilmide *Roma* ja *Güeros* analüüs; neljas peatükk on nende kahe mängufilmi võrdlev analüüs. Järeldus arutleb ka lõputöö tulemust -- filmide maastike rolli normide ning väärtuste kujundajate ja lammutajatena Mehhiko ühiskonna suunal. See viitab, et *Roma* ja *Güeros*'e maastikud ei eksisteeri ruumina ainult meelelahutuse tarbeks, vaid ka Mehhiko ühiskonna ülesehituse mõistmiseks. *Roma* ja *Güeros*'e maastikud on ideoloogilise laenguga asukohad, mis toetavad Mehhikos leiduvaid ühiskondlikke ideid, väärtusi ja rolle; mis seeläbi mõjutavad publikut looma või kujundama oma arvamust Mehhiko ühiskonnast.

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Appendices:

Appendix A



Fig. 1. The laundry area. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 2. The bakery skeletos. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 3. Echeverría and PRI propaganda. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 4. A glimpse of Roma neighbourhood. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 5. The rural area. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 6. The marching band. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 7. A peaceful protest. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.



Fig. 8. Protest intervention. Alfonso Cuarón, *Roma* (2018), Netflix.

Appendix B



Fig. 1. Modern Mexico City. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.

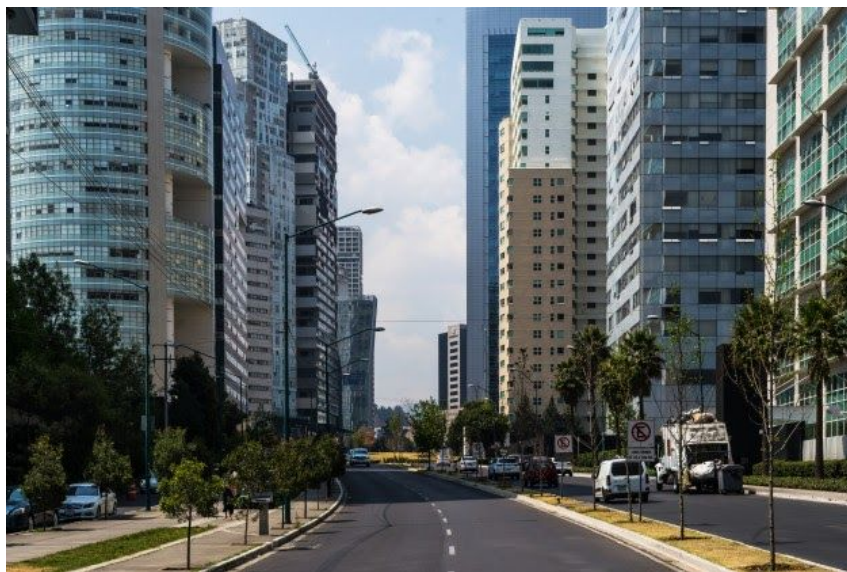


Fig. 2. High Park and Grand Santa Fé built in 2006-2009. https://www.freepik.com/photo/santa-fe-mexico-financial-district_2375516.htm. Accessed 17 Apr. 2020.



Fig. 3. The wrong turn. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.



Fig. 4. UNAM at night. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.



Fig. 5. The interior contrast. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.



Fig. 6. Street at night. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.



Fig. 7. Street during the day. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.



Fig. 8. The traffic congestion. Alonso Ruizpalacios, *Güeros* (2014), IMCINE.