



Still from *El Velador*, courtesy of Icarus Films

Two Notes on Recent Films by Gianfranco Rosi and Natalia Almada

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I.



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A heavy-set figure retrieves a piece of gauzy black fabric that lies over the back of an armchair. Without uttering a word, he moves to the bathroom mirror behind him and drapes the material over his head, fashioning a makeshift veil. The reflection in the mirror looks very much like a medieval European executioner. The resemblance, we are soon to learn, is hardly incidental.

So begins Gianfranco Rosi's 2010 documentary, *El Sicario: Room 164*. The film was inspired by Charles Bowden's article "The Sicario: A Juárez Hitman Speaks," published in *Harper's Magazine* (May 2009, 44-53). Edited transcripts of the interviews that Rosi filmed have been published in translation as *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin*. As I argue below, the film is most richly understood when the circumstances of its production are taken into account, so my discussion of the film will have occasion to incorporate information from these additional sources.

Excepting a few suggestively timed exterior shots of urban landscapes along the U.S.-Mexico border, the eighty minute film consists of a series of monologues delivered by the veiled man recorded entirely within the confines of a motel room on the U.S. side of the border. The speaker claims to have spent twenty years working as a sicario—a contract killer for an organized crime syndicate in Mexico. The film is an abridged version of his life history. For reasons we learn at the film's end, though, the sicario's tale constitutes more than a simple memoir. By confessing to the misdeeds he has perpetrated, the sicario is also performing an act of penance, for he has been reformed. After recounting a harrowing and near-miraculous escape from the clutches of his former associates, he describes his conversion to evangelical Christianity. Indeed, it is this conversion experience that compelled him to publicize his story.

The act of concealing the former sicario's identity initially seems to be a necessary or strictly utilitarian measure. In his preface to the *Autobiography*, Charles Bowden notes that, "the price on [the former sicario's] head is at least \$250,000 and rising." As Molly Molloy writes in her introduction to *Autobiography*, "The veil is the filmmaker's idea and is intended just to hide the man's face and also allow him to breathe, but it turns out to be a stroke of genius." I contend that the genius of the veil lies in its symbolic quality: it is a condensation of the logic that will organize the entire film. As I shall endeavor to demonstrate in my discussion, the protagonist's act of veiling himself concatenates in a series of intersubjective transpositions that not only encompasses the film's entire *mise-en-scène* but ultimately extends beyond the frame of the film itself, assimilating all who view it into its economy. By compulsively repeating the logic of veiling at each level of the film's organization, Rosi introduces an imbalance into the circuit of exchange that links the sicario, his victims, and his *patrón*, as well as the filmmaker, God, and ultimately, the film's audience. For better or for worse, in conspiring to protect the sicario's identity, the film has the effect of turning Rosi in an accessory after-the-fact to all of the crimes described therein. This puts his viewers in the uncomfortable position of having to decide whether to hold Rosi accountable for aiding and abetting a confessed murderer.

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The film's inaugural act of veiling is followed by an exposition of what motivated the selection of Room 164 for staging the interview. Our confinement to this space is not a simple concession to his safety; it is also a poetic repetition of the confinement he purportedly imposed on one of his victims. For three days, the sicario tells us, he and some of his associates held a man captive in this same room, while their employer awaited the repayment of a delinquent debt. (As evidence of his professionalism, the sicario informs us that by the time the patrón had received his recompense, the abductee was only marginally worse for wear: "You could barely see any swelling.") His major assets duly repossessed, the debtor was to be delivered (alive) to some of the sicario's colleagues on the Mexican side of the border. Our sicario knows better, of course, than to speculate about what fate might await him there.



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Eminently forthcoming, the repentant sicario illustrates his litany of trespasses with a sketchpad and a squeaky brown marker. This directorial device, too, seems designed to meet a basic cinematic necessity: namely, to infuse the sicario's monologues with a modicum of visual dynamism. But, as his confession progresses, the contours and gradients of a complex topography begin to emerge from out of his illustrations. He diagrams an intersection where he and his colleagues once absconded with their prey; he outlines residential neighborhoods where they have buried countless corpses; he describes torture scenes that took place in abandoned industrial complexes and warehouses. All the while, Room 164 doubles as an echo chamber, resonating with these spaces until the cargoes they conceal—contraband drugs, illegal firearms, untaxed income; torture victims, corpses, penitents—become perfectly interchangeable. For the sicario and his colleagues, the shadowy corners and blind alleys of this landscape afford the topographical equivalents of the veil he now wears.

Rosi's documentary becomes a pretext for the director to enter the veiled space of Room 164 and to bring his viewers in with him. This decision has two consequences. In the first place, with his own entrée, Rosi effectively re-stages the act of extortion to which the sicario has confessed. In so doing, he displaces the sicario from his former position as extortionist and comes to occupy that places himself: Rosi is playing the part of a sicario,

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only with a camera instead of a gun. Meanwhile, the *former* sicario assumes the role of the debtor. That is, he now finds himself in a position to make reparations for the social or legal debts that he incurred in this same room. In the second place, by filming the sicario's confession, Rosi prepares to re-stage the scene of extortion yet again. Just as before, roles will be swapped anew: Rosi will now play the part of the debtor, and his audience will take its place as the overseers of his expiation.

However, the substitution of the camera for a gun introduces a fundamental rupture in the chain of punishment and reparation that has circumscribed Room 164 since the sicario's first stint there. With Rosi's intervention, we are now in a position to serve as judge and jury at his trial. And even if we should find him guilty as an accessory after-the-fact, we nevertheless commute his sentence by our very inaction. Instead of issuing a subpoena that would order Rosi to lift the veil from the sicario's face, we effectively acquit Rosi of his crime and absolve the sicario of his many sins. As a result, the debt that has migrated from one occupant to the next suddenly finds itself subsidized by an entire corporation: we, the viewers, buy shares in it each time we watch Rosi's film. Now, rather than moving ineluctably from one person to another—first from debtor to sicario, then from sicario to filmmaker—the debt can finally be shared by thousands of people, indefinitely. This is a radical conceptual alternative to the state-sponsored and U.S.-endorsed escalation of violence.

II.



There is a basic structural symmetry between *El Sicario: Room 164* and another documentary from 2011, Natalia Almada's *El Velador* (The Night Watchman). Like Rosi, Almada examines the fallout of the hemispheric "war on drugs" through the lens of a particular space. Her eponymous protagonist is a laconic night watchman at a cemetery on the outskirts of Culiacán whose mediation between the interior and the exterior of that space affords a very different view

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of the landscapes over and through which contraband forms of capital circulate.

No one in Almada's film—least of all Almada herself—ever explicitly acknowledges the nature of this cemetery. Nevertheless, her camera registers certain telltale peculiarities, discreetly assembling a demographic profile of the dead. Graveside photographs reveal the cemetery's inhabitants to be overwhelmingly men. Their dates of birth betray their young age, while their dates of death show a suspicious synchronicity: 1978 to 2009; 1990 to 2009; 1977 to 2009; 1972 to 2009; 1973 to 2009. By the sheer immensity and ostentation of their mausoleums, we can surmise that these young men boasted access to enviable financial resources. And if this were not enough, Almada occasionally interweaves the film with local news reports of the waves of violence that have gripped northern and central Mexico since President Felipe Calderón declared his ill-conceived war on organized crime. Without ever saying as much, Almada makes clear that the men who are buried in this cemetery were on the other side of that war.

The desert cemetery in *El Velador* teems with a veritable army of colonizers. As the sun is setting, the velador warns Almada about the nocturnal visitors who pay their respects to the dead with noisy, drunken revelries. The relentless Sinaloa sun rises and we see construction workers toiling perennially to erect increasingly grandiose mausoleums. We see dutiful widows adorning graves with candles and flowers and bottles of liquor, while their children are left to entertain themselves. An enterprising snack vendor arrives with the newly setting sun to ply the bereaved with refreshments, and the night sky delivers news from Culiacán atop radio and TV waves. For the most part, nothing more happens in Almada's film: she eschews any obvious dramatic structure, and (in striking contrast to Rosi) disfavors dialogue. As a consequence, her film is unencumbered by the narrative conventions of traditional documentaries. Almada has chosen instead to use the medium of film to conduct a quiet, respectful séance.

Under Almada's watchful eye, the cemetery's mausoleums begin to tremble, as if the heat rising off the desert floor were warping their image. Their imposing mass slowly erodes into a procession of disembodied hands: gripping a shovel to mix cement; wielding a mop; lifting a cigarette to a pair of lips during a brief moment of respite. These gestures culminate in the hands of the velador himself. The film draws inexorably to its conclusion as he systematically hoses the parched earth of the cemetery, libating the dead with liter after liter of precious water. This ritual profligacy is useless, perhaps, but in the context of Almada's film it is far from senseless. The velador's expensive and unproductive act of irrigation, the conspicuous displays of wealth in the multi-storey mausoleums, the thousands of casualties that have accumulated in the disastrous war on drugs: these are not accidental deformations of an ideal utilitarian rationality, but rather direct consequences of the social and economic conditions that make possible the very fantasy of rationality itself. The accumulation of a surplus in one quarter of the capitalist world has always depended on sacrifice in another. It should come as no surprise, then, that a cemetery such as this would become the scene of a literal phantasmagoria, where the ghosts of the sacrificed commune with the specters of capital.

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The latter speak to us, quite garrulously, if we are attentive enough to hear them. In the film they take on the guises of all the commodity fetishes that have infiltrated the cemetery's perimeter. When the velador retrieves the discarded beer cans that have accumulated in the night, for instance, we must not mistake these for mere inanimate refuse. These particular commodities come from the border city of Tecate. The spirits that reside within will tell us that "Tecate" is not just any toponym. In a sense, Tecate names toponymy itself, insofar as the Nahuatl suffix "-*tecatl*" designates the inhabitant of a particular place. This linguistic involution—naming a product after a place, named after place-names in general—colludes with the value-adding fantasy that Tecate beer is a quintessentially Mexican product, rooted in the terroir of Baja California no less than the distilled spirits of Weber Blue Agave are rooted in the soil of Tequila, Jalisco.

Confined to the space of the cemetery, Almada's film cannot interrogate the spirits of the empty cans of beer much further. In order to perceive the silent, spectral dialogue that Almada conjures, then, we must search outside the film itself to trace something of the history that lies concealed behind the aluminum gleam of these seemingly innocuous cans of beer. The historical record tells us that breweries on the Mexican side of the border were able to consolidate much of their current capital thanks in no small part to the teetotalling efforts of their neighbors to the north. Prohibition in the U.S. turned residents north of the border into regular patrons of Mexican saloons—and, by extension, into consumers of Mexican beer. (*Pace Marx*, one would be hard pressed to regard the contemporary repetition of this history as farcical, or anything less than fully tragic.) More lucrative still, Prohibition opened other Latin American markets that had previously been awash in U.S.-brewed intoxicants.¹ Mexican breweries' market value has grown steadily during the course of the intervening century, making Tecate, along with all the other brands controlled by the Monterrey-based Cervecería Cuauhtémoc Moctezuma, a prized acquisition for Heineken International in 2010, well after Almada had finished filming. By November 2011, their vice president of brand marketing declared Tecate to be the second highest selling brand in all of Heineken's holdings.² One of the more sublime ironies that now haunts the afterlife of Almada's

film is that Heineken International was one of three Dutch brewing companies fined by the European Commission in 2007 for operating a price fixing cartel.³

It would be a simple enough task to exhume a similar account of the Delicado brand cigarettes that the velador smokes (as of this writing, Philip Morris is the majority shareholder of La Tabacalera Mexicana, which has produced Delicados for over a century) or of the gleaming Audi that one of the bereaved *doñitas* drives. Ultimately, though, the spirits animating all of these commodity fetishes will testify to the same effect: they will confess that they could not continue to enchant consumers in one corner of the free world were it not for a steady supply of desperate wage laborers in another. The dead young men whose corpses are fertilizing the Sinaloa desert cannot be understood as anything other than the aggravation of a pre-existing historical condition. The process of capitalization that makes cannabis, heroin, and cocaine so profitable is fundamentally indistinguishable from the market forces that sell Tecate beer to U.S. consumers while lining the pockets of a cadre of Dutch men. By this token, the mausoleums in Almada's film are as much heliotropic monuments to free trade as they are memorials to dead criminals.

Together, the voices who speak to us through *El Sicario: Room 164* and *El Velador* make a compelling case for a critical reexamination of the misguided policies, priorities, and prejudices that underwrite the hemispheric traffic in contraband substances. The army of ghosts drafted into the war on drugs provides ample testimony that neither peace nor justice can come from a direct military confrontation with the forces of supply and demand. The spiral of retribution that plays out along the U.S.-Mexico border and the extravagant accumulation of wealth in the Sinaloa desert are both clear indications that we must seek an economic solution to what is, fundamentally, a problem of economy. As long as the institutionalized structural inequalities that determine the global flows of capital go unchallenged; as long as there are desperately poor, relatively uneducated men willing to kidnap and murder indiscriminately for a living; as long as their labors can be organized profitably on a scale broad enough to pose a significant challenge to the sovereignty of a state like Mexico, any militarized efforts at prohibition are destined to fail—and, if the wealth expended in the Sinaloan desert is any indication, to fail more and more spectacularly.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Gabriela Recio, "Drugs and Alcohol: U.S. Prohibition and the Origins of the Drug Trade in Mexico, 1910-1930," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34(1): 21-42.

² Ramiro Alonso Lucero, "Tecate, la

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Segunda Marca Más Valiosa de Heineken."

<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/finanzas/90917.html>

³ Serge Durande, "Final Report of the Hearing Officer on the Procedure in Case COMP/37.766 – Dutch Beer Market," Official Journal of the European Union, 6/12/2009.

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