

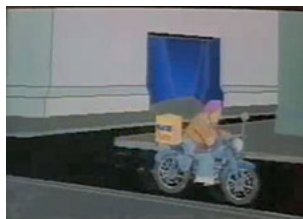
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## **Perturbatory Narration in Mexican Film: *Juegos nocturnos/Nocturnal Games*, *El agujero negro del sol/The Black Hole of the Sun*, and *El incidente/The Incident***

The two Mexican short films *Juegos nocturnos* and *El agujero negro del sol* combine the three narrative strategies of perturbatory narration in an exemplary fashion and, doing so, model their fictional worlds in very different ways. Also from Mexico, the bizarre feature film *El incidente*, described by its author as psychological science fiction<sup>1</sup>, employs for the most part extremely paradoxical narrative procedures and on closer analysis reveals markedly perturbatory qualities.

### **1. *Juegos nocturnos* (Nocturnal Games)**

In the opening shots of *Juegos nocturnos* an old computer starts up, with a child's fingers tapping on the keyboard. Against a dark blue background a title appears, "Juegos nocturnos / Nocturnal Games", and with it a moment of empuzzlement, for it is not clear whether this title is on the diegetic computer or the extradiegetic screen. The next, relatively long scene shows a group of young men drawing lots to decide who is to break into a certain house during the night to steal a statue of Christ. But before the person in question leaves, the viewer sees a young boy playing a computer video game featuring a motor-cyclist (00:02:11–13):



**Figs. 1a and 1b:** *Nocturnal Games*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.imcine.gob.mx/comunicacion-social/comunicados-y-noticias/el-incidente-de-isaac-ezban-es-una-pelicula-de-ciencia-ficcion-psicologica> (17.08.2016).

From this point on, the video game plotline (B) coincides in a puzzling way with that of the break-in (A).

**Plotline A**



**Plotline B**



**Figs. 2a and 2b:** *Nocturnal Games*, plotlines A and B

Plotline B can be divided into the actions of the boy (Ba) playing on the computer and the fragmentarily presented audio-visual game itself (Bb). The interplay between the virtual world of the game (provisionally here ‘hypodiegetic’ level) and the fictionally real world of the break-in and the boy with his computer (provisionally ‘intradiegetic’ level) functions according to the principle of communicating vessels: the alternating presentation creates a sense of simultaneity. The two plotlines are additionally defined by being tinted respectively red (Ba) and blue (A). The continuous switching between the two (with A quantitatively dominant) focuses attention on an increasing convergence, initially in the form of an acoustic metalepsis, when video-game sounds from B infiltrate into A (00:04:10 – 00:04:12).<sup>2</sup> This is followed in A by the old house-owner suddenly appearing before the burglar, echoing a threatening scene from the video game. In both plotlines this gives way to a fight in which the burglar involuntarily kills the old man with a stray shot from his pistol, followed by flight scenes, where the burglar runs in panic into a house, climbs onto an upper patio, jumps across to the neighboring house and taps on the window of the boy playing on his computer – a narrative short-circuit between the plotlines whose meaning can be interpreted in three different ways:

<sup>2</sup> The paradoxical device of metalepsis refers to the (vertical or horizontal) transgression of spatial, temporal or ontological narrative orders (metalepsis of the *énoncé*) or communicative situations (metalepsis of the *énonciation*) (cf. Schlickers 2005).

## 1) Model I

The boy and the burglar are intradiegetic, the video game scenes hypodiegetic. In this case the coincidence of the video game scenes in both timing and content with those of the break-in is either pure chance – a highly unsatisfactory solution that precludes metalepsis, for although the boy and the burglar inhabit spatially different worlds, their meeting (however surprising) is not impossible. Or alternatively, the (hypodiegetic) video game scenes exercise a fantastical influence on the (intradiegetic) scenes of plotline A, qualifying the figure as an ascending metalepsis of the *énoncé*, or inversely plotline A intervenes in the video game scenes (descending metalepsis).

## 2) Model II

The video game scenes and the burglary are hypodiegetic, the boy diegetic. This case posits the same coincidence in timing and content as the first model, but the meeting between the boy and the burglar constitutes a vertical metalepsis of *énoncé* in which the burglar moves up from the hypodiegetic level to the intradiegetic boy, like the character in Cortázar's "Continuidad de los parques" ("Continuity of the Parks", 1964), which performs the same transition and proceeds to kill its own reader.

## 3) Model III

The third model introduces the fascinating idea that the video game played by the intradiegetic boy itself creates the burglary, which is therefore at a deeper level. Here the virtual world of the game can and does generate a 'real' world of its own.<sup>3</sup>

The final meeting between the boy and the burglar can only be satisfactorily explained in terms of the vertical metalepsis of Models II and III, which resembles this paradoxical device in Miguel de Unamuno's novel *Niebla* (*Mist*), where a character goes in search of its author. Here, however, the boy-creator, hearing his character at the window, gets up and, without a word, closes it. Ignoring the cries for help, he returns to his game and coolly presses the 'enter' button that disposes of both his characters – the cyclist as well as the man at the window. He is rewarded with the top score. Asked by the program if he would like to play again, he smiles with contented malice.

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<sup>3</sup> One could, of course, also argue that the burglary is a simple fantasy of the boy. But this is narratologically as banal as the 'chance' solution of Model 1.

Model III – the solution I personally prefer – allows *Juegos nocturnos* to be classified as a pseudodiegesis<sup>4</sup>, for although, quantitatively speaking, plotline A dominates at the hypo-hypodiegetic level, the intradiegetic plotline Ba actually constitutes the main narrative thread. True to its title, *Juegos nocturnos* features a boy playing ominous night-games – a reading that is reinforced by some of the objects he has around him in his room. Towards the middle of the film one sees a skull on his desk, and looming behind him on the wall is a poster of Dracula, as if he were himself the acolyte of that evil genius. Through the medium of a normally harmless video game, Draculean evil invokes a world of corruption and criminal violence, which in turn impacts the “real” intradiegetic world, where a new game is impending, suggesting that it can all begin again in an endless loop. The surprising twist of this ending is constitutive for the genre of unreliable, deceptive narrative.

In its combination of elements of paradoxical narration (metalepsis, narrative short-circuit, pseudodiegesis and endless loop) with the multiple puzzles of its threefold modeling possibilities, its fantasy dimension, and the deceptive narrative strategy of its final twist, *Juegos nocturnos* is a genuine example of perturbatory narration.

## 2 *El agujero negro del sol* (*The Black Hole of the Sun*)

The same is true of the more complex short film *El agujero negro del sol* (*The Black Hole of the Sun*). Its opening sequence shows a ragged old man who walks down the sidewalk under a ladder (Fig. 3a) and stops at a red crossing light.



Fig. 3a: *The Black Hole of the Sun*, opening sequence

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4 Cf. Genette (1972 and 2004, 14–15) and McHale (1987, 115), who see pseudodiegesis as both deceptive and paradoxical. They compare it with *trompe-l'œil* as “deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world” (McHale).

When the light changes to green he steps onto the street; from off, a shrill sound is heard (00:00:30 – 00:00:32). The scene, which turns out to be a nightmare, ends with a hard cut (hypodiegetic level):



Fig. 3b: *The Black Hole of the Sun*

A man wakes suddenly from sleep (intradiegetic level, Fig. 3b), turns off the alarm clock (6 a.m.) and goes back to sleep. The dream continues, segueing acoustically via a recognizable dream-sound to the old man, who is watching a mobile with a black sun motif swing gently to and fro. The sleeper wakes again and looks at the clock. After a mere ten seconds of projection time it is already an hour later – a time-leap indicative of the fact that the ‘camera’ does not show everything. The implied viewer must pay attention.

The next scene contains a spatiotemporal shift. Now fully awake, the man sits in an automobile and sees in the mirror, on the wing of a green truck, the motif of the black sun of which he had just dreamed. This first fantasy intrusion of dream into his ‘real life’ represents either an ascending metalepsis of the *énoncé*, or alternatively a simple (but once again strange) coincidence between reality and dream, a *mise en abyme* of the *énoncé*.<sup>5</sup> The man drives on, and the next hard cut shows him on campus, where he is addressed by a student carrying a book containing *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Act Without Words*. The student finds “Beckett’s idea of existentialism” interesting, especially the imperative he sees in these works “to withdraw from the culture that’s weakening you [...], to give it all up [...], in favor of an anti-contemplative life [...], to think of becoming someone else, to stop seeking, inquiring [...], to allow death to show you the truth about this empty, bureaucratically repetitive existence” (00:01:30 – 00:02:14, my italics).<sup>6</sup> The key to the film lies in the *mise en abyme* of poetics that this scene enacts, for the student holds in his very hands a prime example of the culture he would reject.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Meyer-Minnemann and Schlickers (2004, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> “el hombre debe alejarse de la cultura que le enferma [...], dejarlo todo. Por una vida anti-contemplativa [...] pensar en ser otra persona ... dejar de investigar [...] dejar que la muerte le enseñe la verdad de toda esta vida tan burocráticamente repetitiva y vacía”.

Similarly in the next scene, where the professor is explaining Jung's theory of dreams and archetypes: here the *mise en abyme* – again at the level of poetics – concerns the sun as an archetype pointing to “change ... to a new life” (00:03:15). And with these words an extradiegetic musical theme segues across to the plotline of the old man, who awakens suddenly in a bus on his way to town. This is the first indication of ambiguity or empuzzlement in the hierarchy of dreamer and dreamed; for it is equally possible that the old man has dreamed the scenes with the professor (cf. below). In the following scene we see him washing cars at the roadside, after which he takes a nap with his eyes closed.

The extradiegetic music continues into the next scene, in which the professor draws a sun in his notebook that looks just like the one he dreamed and saw on the wing of the truck. The music stops, and a cut leads to the old man, who is woken by a loud hooting of car horns and starts working again. The markers for the old man's dream are clearer here, but are easily overlooked, especially in view of the onset of a conventional recoding according to which the opening nightmare is ascribed to the professor, whose plotline is in any case quantitatively dominant.

A cut leads into a lecture hall where the professor is telling his students about his childhood dreams of another world beyond the walls of his respectable, paternalistic home, a world peopled by thieves, maniacs and ghosts – the world of the old man, in fact, to which he still feels drawn, triggered by memory and synthesized in a *mise en abyme* of the *énoncé*.

After the lecture, the professor cannot start his car, so he gets out and walks down the sidewalk from which he had dreamed in the initial sequence. The ladder is still there – another intrusion of dream into fictional reality – but he walks round it, not under it as the old man did: he is still at this point a ‘respectable man’. Again we hear the extradiegetic music (00:05:49), and the professor stands before the same crossing light about which he had also dreamed. This changes with the same loud metallic sound, and the same shrill tone sounds as he sets his foot on the street. He stands still in shock, and then walks slowly on, followed now at a few paces by the old man, who again walks under the ladder – the cut this time has no acoustic marker, nor is there a dream marker. On the contrary, the two men are now on the same diegetic level – a clear narrative short-circuit and another strictly fantastic moment. The old man stops at the crossing light and the professor, looking at him in shocked incredulity (00:06:34), stands petrified in the middle of the street. Faintly psychedelic extradiegetic music is heard, as three semi-low-angle shots zoom in first on the old man, then on the professor. The old man glances at the green light for vehicles,

which changes to yellow; the ‘camera’ shows the professor in zero ocularization<sup>7</sup>, still standing on the street, before cutting back to the old man, who is attentively watching the other character. The pedestrian lights change from green to red, and in the background one sees the black sun on an awning (internal ocularization of the old man, 00:06:54).<sup>8</sup> The vehicle lights change to green, but the professor still does not move. A green truck approaches and the screen turns black; tires screech, and the next shot shows the professor lying on the street, his face covered in blood. Dying, he sees the black sun on the wing of the truck, spattered with his own blood (00:07:09).

This marks the end of the professor’s life-cycle. Cut (with music) to the old man, who wakes up, startled: he is, then, after all, the main dreamer. And the fact that he dreams not only the professor’s death, but also his own role in it, indicates the pseudodiegetic structure of the film – an interpretation reinforced by the presence in his ramshackle hut of the volume of Beckett’s plays. Evidently it was he that dreamed of the student carrying this same book; and the student’s words about withdrawing from culture and becoming someone else referred to his own life. He looks thoughtfully at the book and seems to remember those words, to remember his former life as an intellectual, a professor in a respectable world, and the dreams he had of ‘another’ world – even, perhaps, the dream of the archetypal sun that promised a new life. Perhaps he survived a road accident and changed his life for that of the poor man on the margins of society. Perhaps that is why he smiles now, as he leaves his hut, the morning sun shining on his face.

The perturbatory narrative strategies of *El agujero negro del sol* can also be modeled in a number of possible ways:

- 1) The surprising final twist that reveals the professor’s dream of the old man to be the old man’s dream of the professor can be classified as both a deceptive narrative procedure and a pseudodiegesis.<sup>9</sup> But the narrative structure is more complex; for the one set of dreams – the old man’s dreams of the pro-

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<sup>7</sup> Zero ocularization is the non-marked or ‘nobody’s’ shot, cf. Schlickers (2009).

<sup>8</sup> The first shot of the red pedestrian crossing light has no black sun (internal ocularization of the professor, 00:06:03), but it is there in the second shot (old man’s view). This might be read as a hint at another narrative level or loop in the Möbius strip (cf. below). After all, the black sun on the awning had already appeared in the professor’s opening dream (00:00:28).

<sup>9</sup> Julio Cortázar’s short story “La noche boca arriba” (“The Night Face-Up”) contains a similar pseudodiegesis: After a bad motor-cycle accident the protagonist dreams in hospital of a Motec, persecuted by the Aztecs in the War of Flowers, who lands on the sacrificial altar, where his heart will be cut out. But at the end of the story it transpires that the reverse is the case: the Motec dreams of the man lying in hospital after an accident.

fessor (hypodiegetic level) – contains the other set – the professor’s dreams of the old man (hypo-hypodiegetic level) – embedded within it.



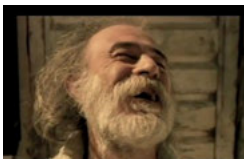
**Figs. 4a + 4b:** *The Black Hole of the Sun*: The hypodiegesis (Fig. 4a) dominates quantitatively about the intradiegesis (Fig. 4b)

2) The fantastical intrusions of the professor’s dream into the world of fictional reality are, then, twists of a Möbius strip.

3) The impossibility of establishing a clear hierarchy between the dreamers resembles Rubin’s vase, with its two incompatible interpretations (Mahler 2011, 393–394).

4) The fantastical narrative short-circuit of the last third of the film entails a meta-morphosis through fusion of the two subordinate narrative levels, when the old man and the professor, dreamer and dreamed, meet on the same diegetic level, at the same time and in the same place.

5) This short circuit in turn suggests a horizontal modeling according to which the old man and the professor are one and the same person: two different egos embodying diametrically opposed lives. This can be related to the concept of *otredad* (otherness) of the well-known Mexican author Octavio Paz. The dark side – “the black hole of the sun” – triumphs over the gray world of the professor’s clear rational principles. Hence the old man’s laugh as the sun shines illuminates his face in the final scene.



**Fig. 5:** *The Black Hole of the Sun*: final scene

### 3 *El incidente (The Incident)*

Produced in 2014, Isaac Ezban’s *El incidente (The Incident)* is described on the cover of the DVD as “a beautiful mindfuck”. It consists of two strange loops



linked to each other in the second third of the film by means of a double Möbius strip. The film begins with an intradiegetic framing sequence of a very old woman lying on an escalator, who remembers a (or her) wedding – a visualized hypodiegetic motif that is taken up again later.



Fig. 6: *The Incident*: intradiegetic framing sequence

In her hand she holds a red notebook that also appears in the two stories that follow. These are conveyed in successive blocks clearly divided by black frames and distinct plotlines. Both stories feature people imprisoned in paradoxical spatial structures that function like Penrose stairs<sup>10</sup> and are known in narratology as ‘strange loops’.

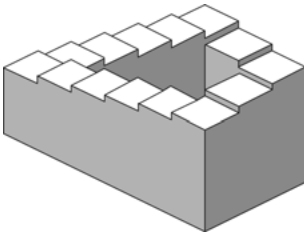


Fig. 7: Penrose stairs

Each story is subdivided into a sequence a) comprising the first third of the film and a sequence b) that continues the story with a time-leap of 35 years:

1a Stairwell	1b 35 years later
2a Country road	2b 35 years later

Fig. 8: Table of sequences in *The Incident*

1a) The first story is about two brothers, one of whom is shot by a police officer in a stairwell, where he bleeds to death. The surviving brother and the po-

<sup>10</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penrose\\_stairs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penrose_stairs) (15.08.2016).

liceman are caught in this endlessly circular stairwell for 35 years<sup>11</sup>, a state of affairs made marginally possible by a fantasy refrigerator that refills itself with drinks and moldy sandwiches. A number of other objects the men have brought with them inexplicably reappear every day, and there are further evocations of the fantastic in the multiple references to Philip Dick's dystopian novel *Time Out Of Joint*, which serves as an explicit intertext.



Fig. 9: *The Incident*: sequence 1a

The two men react to the situation differently. The younger man looks after himself, trains his body, and arranges the objects around him in bizarre systems, while the policeman vegetates in dirt and trash and ages rapidly, but at the same time works on a wall-painting covering several floors, in which he reconstructs episodes from his own life.

2a) The second story, which begins with the symbolic image of a hamster in a wheel, tells of a mother with two children and her lover on a country road, where they enter a strange loop: their car always stops at the same sign, near the same lonely gas station, where the food also replenishes itself over 35 years. Another similarity with the first story is that a character dies, in this case the young girl, felled by an asthma attack. We learn later that the deaths of innocent people constitute the 'incident' of the film's title.

A short scene with the old woman on the escalator (01:01:31–1:01:57) represents a flip of the Möbius strip interweaving the two until now separate plotlines. The sound-track bridges metaleptically across to the stairwell narrative, where the two men have now held out for 35 years. The elder of the two repeats to himself, litanywise, the phrase "remember, Marco Antonio Molina", which the sound-track faintly echoes, while the 'camera' moves from the escalator to the old woman recumbent upon it. While the Möbius strip of the two stories calls

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<sup>11</sup> A stairwell in which the figures run from the ninth to the first floor only to find themselves on the ninth again; and where the law of gravity does not apply, as we see when a bunch of keys thrown down the well hurtles past them from above.

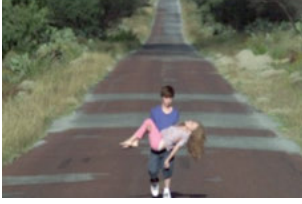


Fig. 10: *The Incident*: sequence 2a

for horizontal modeling, the escalator is a vertical structure moving in an endless loop. Only partially shown, a boy takes a hamster from the hands of the old lady, linking the frame motif with the story of the family on the country road, which is now taken up again (01:01:58). This, however, breaks the logic of the narrative levels, because at this point, two-thirds of the way through the film, the hierarchical narrative structure dissolves, and the two plotlines, which up to this point have been kept separate, converge in a dizzying mix. Because of the Möbius strip structure, it is still not clear, however, whether they run parallel to the frame story or are hierarchically subordinate to it.<sup>12</sup>

2b) Here, too, 35 years have passed and the mother and her partner are now old. They drive around and have sex in their car, otherwise living – or, rather, vegetating – in a vile mess of trash and dirt. The boy (Daniel) had left them after the death of his sister. Now in his mid 40s, rather like the younger brother in the stairwell story, he has made an orderly life for himself along the road: he looks after himself and his surroundings and structures his activities. It is in this state that he meets his mother’s aging partner.



Fig. 11: *The Incident*: sequence 2b

He no longer remembers his mother, nor, the old man tells him, does she remember him – but the old lover has forgotten what he wants to tell Daniel. “That’s what we old ones are like, Daniel” (01:13:24). The theme of forgetting links this phase of the story to that of the stairwell, as does the classical

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<sup>12</sup> The stories are also color-marked: 1a in gray, notable in the white walls of the stairwell, the gray steel stairs, and the neon lighting; 2a in lively tones, especially the vermilion of the automobile, the man’s shirt, and the woman’s nail varnish.

music first heard from off in the frame story, then intradiegetically at the beginning of the first, and later also in the second story.<sup>13</sup>

1b) The old man in the stairwell repeats – but now speaking to himself – the words of his confrere on the country road: “That’s what we old ones are like, Daniel” (01:13:25). In other words the Möbius strip has flipped again. But he suddenly remembers something, and realizes that he will die if he tells the young man what it is. The latter asks him who Daniel is, and the old man answers: “Don’t become me!” Then he strikes through the drawings of his family on the wall, saying they no longer exist, that Marco Antonio Molina (the police officer from 1a / old man from 1b) no longer exists, and that he himself is Daniel.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 12: *The Incident*: sequence 1b

Cut to the ‘real’ 45-year-old Daniel (2b), followed first by an intercut of Old Man I (1b), and then the 10-year-old Daniel (2a) (01:14:20 – 01:14:26). Cut back to the stairwell (1b), where the old man in a moment of anagnorisis realizes that he has killed the brother of the man with whom he has lived for 35 years – something the addressee already knows. But he killed him under a false identity, that of the non-existent police officer Marco Antonio Molina. The result is paradoxical: the old man in the stairwell (1b) is at the same time the young man on the country road (2b) – i.e.  $1b = 2b$  – which means Old Man I must have been young Daniel (2a). At this point, however, the question remains as to the status of the ‘non-existent’ character of Molina in 1a. Does it also mean  $1a/1b = 2a/2b$ ?

The film continues with the second story: the old woman is dead and the old man (2b) dies slowly, at the same time as Old Man I. The two plotlines fuse para-

**13** The boy Daniel plays a piano version of motifs from the first movement – marked “*lebhaft*” (lively) – of Schumann’s 4th symphony, a piece whose motifs are also interwoven in circular fashion. (I am indebted to Vera Toro for this observation.)

**14** I shall distinguish the figures in the two plotlines as follows:

1a = the police officer Molina from the first stairwell story

1b = of the police officer Molina from the initial stairwell story 35 years later = Old Man I

2a = the boy Daniel from the first country road story (with his mother and Roberto)

2b = the c. 45-year-old Daniel of the second country road story with Roberto = Old Man II.

doxically in the character of Daniel, who is both Old Man I and the 45-year-old on the country-road (1b = 2b). He, like the protagonist in Philip Dick's intertext (cf. above), exists simultaneously in two spatiotemporally and ontologically different dimensions.<sup>15</sup> The two old men ask their younger companions to write down their stories, lest they forget them, as they have forgotten themselves. The old man of the second story confesses that he, too, has another name and remembers another incident that is now visualized (01:19:21–01:20:31) as Plotline III – a *mise en abyme* of Plotlines I and II. In this story, he too was 10 years old when he witnessed an accident involving his teacher, in which a child bled to death, whereupon he spent 35 years drifting on a raft together with his teacher, without ever reaching land. At the end of this time, the teacher tells him that he himself had earlier traveled for 35 years in a train that never stopped (Plotline IV) – stories begin to multiply in endless inter-reflection.

Summing them up, the two old men realize that for 70 years they were trapped in two incidents. Old Man I (1b) repeats that he spent 35 years as 'young' Daniel with Roberto on the country road – i.e. with the old man of the second story (2a) – which confirms Daniel's identity with Old Man I (2a = 1b).<sup>16</sup> The second incident refers to the 35 years the two (now) old men spent with the younger men – information with which the double Möbius strip can now be decoded. "You and I are unreal", Old Man II says to the middle-aged Daniel; and Old Man I adds "The real you and the real me, we are somewhere else [...], we are in endless hells"<sup>17</sup> (01:21:26): hells, it transpires, that run parallel to the 'real' world, that are spawned in each case by an 'incident' (cf. 'forking path' below), and that constitute the 'other side' of the double Möbius strip. Men and women, Old Man II explains, must endure these hells in order to gain energy for their real selves; bodily movement is not enough for them; their emotions must also be brought into play. And this is where human sacrifice comes in – hence the deaths, in the various stories, of the young man, the girl and the

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15 The simultaneity is enhanced by the parallel montage of the two stories.

16 When Old Man I realizes that Molina does not exist and that he is himself is Daniel (cf. above), the implied reader concludes that he is referring to the older Daniel of the country road story (2b); but in fact he is referring to the young Daniel of 2a – a clear case of narrative deception. By the same token the country road story (2a) reveals itself as temporally preceding the introductory stairwell story (1a) – or would do so if chronological reconstruction of the stories were not defeated by the fantastical coexistence of the film's various spatiotemporal and ontological dimensions.

17 An explanation that retrospectively confirms the foregoing reconstruction of the stories' fantasy elements, which appear now as genuine components of unreal incident-hells.

boy. After this revelation, the two old men give their younger companions a red booklet (cf. above) and in the same moment die.

Despite being warned not to use the elevator, the young man of Plotline I does so and finds a red uniform there (1b); likewise, Daniel gets into the police car he has been warned to avoid (2b) and finds there a small valise containing not only Molina's apparel (1a) but also the pistol with which he had shot at the other man's brother in the stairwell. In the red booklet he finds a photograph of the two brothers of Plotline I (1a), while the other young man finds a wedding photo that refers to the memories of the old lady in the frame story. Both men change their clothes; Daniel shaves his hair and beard off and is henceforth identical with the policeman of the first story (2b = 1a); the other man (Karl) dons the uniform.

In hindsight it becomes clear that the transformations the two young men undergo take them back to hell they had been through once. For they, like the others, are caught in a narrative loop whose scenes are arranged in a forking-path structure where the police car and elevator are the entrance portals to each one's particular hell. Had they chosen a different path, they might have remained in a real world. A further twist of the Möbius strip sketches the positive and negative versions of this eventuality (01:29:47–01:31:36). First single images separated by black frames, and presented like film negatives from left to right, seem to indicate what the aged Daniel in the stairwell described as the 'real you' and 'real me'. They begin where Plotline II starts, on the country road (2a) and focus on the boy Daniel, now growing up, graduating from school, falling in love, joining the police force (1a), and living happily with his family (2a → 1a). This is followed by a shot of his mother quarreling with her lover (2a), and a sequence presented in reverse order, from right to left, showing the lover's decadence and final bloody suicide in a bathtub. After two shots of the young men in the police car and elevator (1b/2b), the alternative version of the story (alternative both stylistically and plotwise) is taken up again: the mortally injured brother of Plotline I (1a) survives, his brother undergoes therapy, studies at university, falls in love, and marries. An intercut shows the police officer again (1a), then pans from right to left, signaling again the negative version of the story. The officer reappears with the two brothers, who are just leaving the police station; he surprises his wife with a lover, whom he kills, and is consequently sent to prison; cut to him as the old man of the first story at the same place, on his release (1a → 1b, 01:32:52); cut to the young man of Plotline I in the elevator (1b); cut to the police officer in the car (2b).

The epilogue (01:33:29–01:36:29) takes up the wedding sequence from the frame story. The young man is now a lift-boy taking a newlywed couple up to their room in the hotel. When they arrive at the floor where they are staying,

he releases a wasp that stings the bridegroom: yet another incident launching the Möbius strip into infinity. Cut to a rail track along which a train travels, visualizing the verbal memories of the old man on the country road (2b); cut to the water of the lagoon (on which the raft drifted for 35 years); cut to the country road, and – completing this series of intradiegetic résumés – to the stairwell. This is followed by a reprise of the sequence in the hotel and finally of the old lady on the escalator, who holds the red booklet in her uplifted hand. The film ends in this way with an aporetic *mise en abyme*, for everything it shows is already contained in that red book and the end points back to the beginning. The stories can begin again, their multiple dimensions extending into eternity.

All three films discussed here combine the three strategies of perturbatory narration outlined in the Introduction. The films themselves may not be well known, but they demonstrate the innovative, experimental qualities of contemporary Mexican cinema. Their complex structures and dynamics can be described and analyzed with the narratological tools we have developed<sup>18</sup> – which does not, of course, preclude the advent of new filmic structures that may call for modifications to our perturbatory narrative principle.

## Filmography

*El agujero negro del sol*. Directed by Julio Quezada Orozco. 2002. Mexico: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía. Accessed 15 April 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV5mX0bVNI0>.

*El incidente*. Directed by Isaac Ezban. 2014. Mexico: Zima Entertainment, 2016. DVD.

*Juegos nocturnos*. Directed by Pablo Gómez Sáenz Ribot. 1992. Mexico. Accessed 25 May 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJGbh2iMlo>.

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<sup>18</sup> The many damning critiques of Isaac Ezban’s film demonstrate a profound ignorance of narratology: cf. e.g. <http://cinescopia.com/el-incidente-una-insufrible-y-surrealista-mentira-mexicana/2015/09/> (17.08.2016)

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