An Unconventional Zombie in Art Cinema: Biopower and Genre Hybridity in *Halley* (2012)

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Abstract: With an unconventional living-dead protagonist and a minimalist auteur style, *Halley* brings to the fore how the tensions between genre movies and art cinema operate in a transnational context. *Halley* surprises the audience with the story of a security guard who is dead but remains alive. While his flesh decomposes, Beto goes to work and continues with his lonely life pretending that everything is fine. In this sense, the film presents an unconventional zombie: Beto is not a monster, he is harmless and he is an obedient worker, but his condition exhibits his alienation in society. This paper analyzes Beto's impossible embodiment from the perspective of film categorization, taking into account the intersections between auteur cinema and subcultural genres such as zombie movies in a transnational context. To that end, I rely on Dolores Tierney's mapping of cult cinema in Latin America as well as on Ignacio Sánchez Prado's analysis of global art cinema in México, both of which are related to international film circuits. Secondly, this paper focuses on the sociopolitical implications of Beto's living-dead body. I trace the trope of the living-dead character and analyze its political commentary from the perspective of biopower. Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's exploration of the homo sacer and bare life, this paper explores how Beto's embodiment evokes his diminished agency but also its subversive potential. With a body that transcends basic medical categorizations of life and death, Beto confronts Foucault's idea of biopower and resists the clinic.

Keywords: zombie movies, transnational cinema, Sebastián Hofmann, subcultural genres, auteur, bio-power

With an unconventional living-dead protagonist and a minimalist auteur style, *Halley* brings to the fore how the tensions between subcultural genres and art cinema operate in a transnational context. The film focuses on Beto, a lonely security guard at a gym in Mexico City. Aloof and quiet, the character might simply seem ill, but his situation becomes clear when he is taken to the hospital and then to a morgue. The mortician confirms that his body is in fact dead, even though he continues living. Without friends or family, Beto's existence revolves around his job, as he tries to hide his injuries to continue working at the gym. He is attracted to his boss, Luly, who appears to be Beto's only friend. Eventually his physical situation becomes unsustainable and an allegorical final scene suggests that Beto reaches the afterlife.

Beto's loneliness and impossible embodiment are aesthetically inscribed in the film. The lack of narrative events creates a slow pace and the formal choices reinforce a sedentary rhythm. *Halley* is primarily characterised by silence, with many scenes showing Beto alone performing his daily tasks, such as his healing ritual and his commute to work. The temporality of *Halley* magnifies the healing of his wounds, which the film depicts in contemplative scenes with careful detail. The cinematic style does not facilitate a sense of empathy nor disgust for the character. Even though Beto is technically like a zombie, the film does not portray him as the traditional monster of fantasy and horror films because he does not have obscure motivations to hurt innocent citizens. While the coldness of the style infuses Beto with a sense of otherness, the

stylised realism of the film naturalises his impossible situation. The cinematography relies on long takes, long and medium shots, and off-screen space. Close-ups are used scarcely, mainly to highlight the details of Beto's decaying flesh but not his facial expressions. The production design and lighting only deploy a palette of cold neutral tones, except for Luly's red clothes and apartment walls. The acting style is inexpressive and the protagonist does not convey any intense emotions regarding his surreal situation. Instead of showing surprise or frustration, Beto exhibits apathy. As a result, the film aesthetically reinforces the emotional distance from the character, mirroring the uncaring attitude of the world around him.

Figure 1. Cold and neutral tones juxtaposed with Luly's red walls and clothes.

The film's detached style captures Beto's solitude as an individual who has no control over his non-normative body. Ultimately *Halley* stages the diminished agency of a working-class man in a dehumanised capitalist metropolis. With this narrative conflict and cinematic style in mind, this article is prompted by questions of film categorization, transnational reception, and subversion against bio-power. First, I explore how the aesthetic intersections in *Halley* relate to analytical categories such as zombie movies, cult cinema, or auteur films. Modes of production and distribution are conditioned by the transnational context of films, and my intervention in this discussion underscores the problematic power dynamics of subcultural reception. Secondly, this article focuses on the socio-political implications of Beto's body. On the one hand, I trace the trope of the zombie and analyse its significance in *Halley*. On the other hand, I explore how Beto's impossible embodiment is part of a political aesthetic of bio-power that highlights the violence against his body.

Between popular culture and global art cinema: Subcultural genres and auteur aesthetics in a transnational context

Successfully premiered at the independent Sundance Film Festival, and directed by a fanatic of horror movies, *Halley* refuses to play by the rules of film categorization. Yet most reviews of the film highlighted its zombie component, which was not intentional according to the director himself. More accurately, they focused on how the film either reconstructs or departs from zombie genre conventions.[1] Some reviewers even included the film under the umbrella of horror movies or referred to Sebastián Hofmann as a cult director.[2] Regardless of the specific wording,

[1] See, for instance, Hofmann's interviews for *Vice Magazine* and for *Sundance TV*; Marc Sain-Cyr's report of the 2013 edition of the International Film Festival of Rotterdam for *Senses of Cinema*; and Chris Lippard's review of the film at the *Journal of Medical Humanities*.

[2] The film has been included in a list of the '25 best Mexican cult films' (see https://culturacolectiva.com/cine/las-20-mejores-peliculas-mexicanas-de-culto-de-los-ultimos-25-anos) and it is said to have created a 'cult-like

the press coincided in relating the film to subcultural genres that deal with the uncanny, with 'excessive bodies, ruptured decorum,' and with extravagant or death flesh (Gorfinkel 2008: 33). For the most part, this was the case of American and European reviews of the film. Hofmann received the zombie reading of the film with great surprise. Yet he highlights that this interpretation of the film comes from European critics mainly (Mendoza 2013), even though a few Mexican accounts of the film highlighted these elements as well.

Halley's participation in the International Fantastic Film Festival at Sitges epitomises this reading of the film, as this festival specialises in horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres. As a thematic festival focused on 'classic genres,' Sitges manages to serve two purposes. On the one hand, it creates and reinforces a 'specific cinephile culture' by becoming a 'shared social space' for spectators and professionals who enjoy the aforementioned genres. On the other hand, specialised festivals like Sitges constitute spaces to develop specific 'industrial niches' where films can find new distributors and exhibitors. This process has become more acute in the last few years, as these festivals invite more 'industrial agents' and host film markets and professional encounters (Vallejo 2013: 250-254). Unlike most famous film festivals, Sitges is open to the public, who can access the screenings by purchasing a ticket. As a result, with its focus on these often marginalised but 'classical' genres, specialised cinephilia and popular culture coexist at Sitges. At this festival, films range from B movies, commercial blockbusters, and independent auteur films, as long as they belong to the aforementioned genres, or at least show traces of them. Some examples of this diverse gamut include *The Thing* (John Carpenter 1982), *Willow* (Ron Howard 1988), *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991), or *I Lost My Body* (Jeremy Clapin 2019). In sum, this festival works to appeal to subcultural audiences, but also for the commercialization of the films: it blurs the lines between small niche markets and popular culture. This phenomenon is not unique to Sitges. In fact, genres have traditionally been deployed to appeal to the audience and to support the circulation of films in the industry, even in the case of stylistic hybridization and re-articulations.

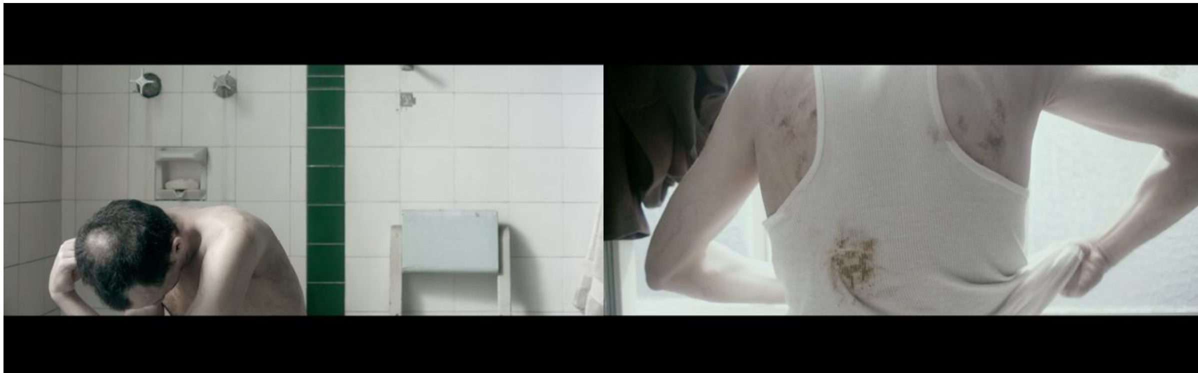

Figure 2. The materiality of Beto's body in decomposition.

However, the focus of reviewers on the genre elements in *Halley* offers a stark contrast that apparently collides with its auteur style. Besides Sitges, the film participated in other international festivals that mainly promote art cinema, such as Morelia, and Rotterdam. Similarly, during its production process the film counted on the support of other first-class

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following among horror fanatics' (see https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/conversacion-sebastian-hofmann-entre-los-cineastas-los-documentalistas).

international festival funds, such as the initiative Cine en Construcción of the San Sebastián Film Festival or the Huber Bals fund of Rotterdam. These international festivals favour auteur cinema, films with a strong personal style that mainly respond to the creative vision of the director and that, in turn, tend to elude traditional genre conventions. As Nadia Lie explains, what these festivals share 'is an ambition to reach a wide international audience of cinephiles, who are interested in consuming what has come to be known as Global Art Cinema' (2018: 26). In other words, these festivals aim to spread international auteur films in a specialised cinephile circuit.

The funding and the circulation of *Halley* in all these international festivals illustrate how classification of films serves to support them nationally and internationally, but in doing so it selectively highlights specific elements present in them. The convergence of genres and auteur styles worldwide is certainly not a new phenomenon, but it is instructive to study these intersections in transnational context, especially when the director comes from a peripheral region. As described by Alberto Elena in his 1999 book, peripheral cinema refers to the film productions that emerge in audio-visual industries outside of Western Europe and North America, which traditionally constituted the industrial centres. Minerva Campos reframes the idea of peripheral cinema in the contemporary context to clarify that it includes Latin American, Asian, and African cinema specifically (2016a: 10). The notion of a cinematic industrial periphery becomes particularly insightful to analyse the power dynamics of film production, distribution, and exhibition, as it mainly focuses on industrial structures.

Films from industrially peripheral regions are subject to categories assigned by institutions in the United States and Europe which operate according to paradigms established in European and American criticism and which often ignore the specificities of the film culture where they emerge. In this sense, 'film history has been written and thought from the Euro-North American centre, from a privileged position that allows (us) to value and judge the cinema of the rest of the world according to our own criteria' (Campos 2016a: 10). As Elena explains, western institutions and scholarship 'support and spread a certain type of peripheral cinema according to elusive and changing criteria' influenced by a sense of cultural distance (1999: 41). As a result, the challenge in scholarship about peripheral films is to be poised between the local and the global; in other words, to avoid tokenizing these films as mere representatives of particular countries, but also to eschew projecting Eurocentric standards while fully decoupling the films from their specific contexts.

Film scholars have addressed these tensions from different angles. For instance, Galt and Schoonover pay attention to how they appear in "art cinema." This notion, which is heavily influenced by auteur theory, emerged from 'the West Europe-North America axis' and only recently and slowly has it grown into 'a global field of industry and aesthetics' (2010: 3-4). As part of this process, the main European film festivals slowly began to support and distribute films from peripheral industrial regions such as Latin America. These institutions uphold the well-being of the local film industry while they also behave as curators of cultural imaginaries (Rueda 2009: 119), intensifying the tensions between the industrial centre and the peripheries. Minerva Campos problematizes how the funding initiatives of these festivals target narratives from 'distant and different' territories (2016b: 75). Similarly, Randall Halle claims that these practices reinforce an 'Orientalising vision' because they promote 'stories that offer to European and North American audiences the tales they already want to hear' (2010: 318). Along these lines Antonio Weinrichter explains that European festivals tend to select either politically engaged or poetic *auteur* films (1995: 30-31). These choices result from what he calls the 'kimono effect,' a phenomenon in which a Western audience appreciates exotic films that locals dislike (and vice-

versa) because of the otherness that they project (1993: 14). Scholars in Latin American Film Studies have explored this issue in depth and have proposed categories of styles based on transnational industrial practices, such as "films with many locations," "exilic and diasporic filmmaking," films with "transnational stars" (Shaw 2013), "opportunistic films" (Hjort 2010), Hubert-Bals-like films (Campos 2016b), and films for transnational viewers, to name a few examples. Other common trends in transnational cinema include the re-examination of external models, especially those from Hollywood.[3] Instead of copying traditional genres, transnational films worldwide appropriate, modify, and adapt dominant styles to their specific cultural contexts.

In spite of all these accounts of the transnational dynamics of film categorization, most scholarship overlooks how they interact with genres such as zombie, cult, horror, and science fiction cinema. In these cases, the tensions between centre and periphery become particularly troublesome because the genres at stake receive their value from being 'subcultural.' In her study of cult cinema in the United States, Elena Gorfinkel establishes insightful connections between cult and auteur films that serve to elucidate the aesthetics and labelling of *Halley*. She explains how the appreciation for excessive films by cult audiences in New York overlapped with that of high-brow cinephiles like the surrealist artists in Europe, who also enjoyed the uncanny qualities of those same films (2008: 33-39). In the case of *Halley*, such connections need to be examined with attention to the transnational context of the film to avoid a selective reading that eschews its full political and allegorical significance. For example, with independent circulation, mainly in streaming and pay per view platforms, *Halley*'s distribution rights have been sold in more than 50 countries. But despite the film's unexpected international success,[4] *Halley* did not receive as much praise in its home country. Given that the film hardly had an audience in Mexico, the reasoning of the critics that consider it a cult film must stem from its cinematic style. In addition, in the age of 'easy to access' digital distribution, which makes obscure texts more readily available, the subcultural value of a film cannot depend solely on its availability (Anonymous 2008: 6). In fact, thanks to digital platforms, films become accessible in the international market more easily, as was the case for *Halley*.

These tensions have been commented upon by Dolores Tierney. In a sound article regarding the transitional dynamics of cult cinema in Latin America, Tierney argues that the local antecedents of the films need to be considered in order to fully 'understand the political and social commentary that goes' with them (2014: 129). For her, classifying these films only in relation to European and North American standards implies a 'colonialist appropriation' that celebrates the 'weirdness' of the film by ignoring local readings of it (2014: 131). Tierney suggests that Latin American films celebrated by cult audiences in the United States are often low budget productions that fail in their attempt to reproduce the codes of mainstream Hollywood cinema due to lack of resources. According to this reading, what American cult audiences celebrate as original and strange is actually the result of technical failure in the imitation of the dominant commercial style. As a result, dealing with subcultural genres in an international context can lead to the inaccurate and 'problematic deployment of transnational subcultural capital' (2014: 131). In this sense, she points out, scholars and critics need to have

[3] For a detailed study of transnational practices in Iberoamerican cinema, see Nadia Lie and Robin Lefere's *Nuevas perspectivas sobre la transnacionalidad del cine hispánico.*

[4] According to an interview with the Mexican publication *Proceso*, Hofmann expected the film to be less successful because *Halley* is 'a slightly hostile film, intense, and very explicit.' See his interview with Mexican film critic Vértiz de la Fuente.

awareness of the potential mistranslation of films from Latin America across borders. I propose that the 'weirdness' that European and North American audiences appreciate also emerges in response to those commercial codes, not only from failed imitation but from a process of cultural re-appropriation and adaptation to the local context as well. Similarly, such is the case of latsploitation films, a genre with high levels of violence and sex that appeals to international audiences. In his defence of this analytical category, Eric Schaeffer points out that looking at exploitation genres in a transnational context serves to discern the dynamics between local and global film cultures (2009: xi-xii). In any case, the issue of projecting European and North American standards to films from the industrial periphery centres the discussion when it comes to subcultural genres.

More specifically, *Halley* emerges in the context of the deconstruction of 'national cinema' and the subsequent rise of internationally acclaimed 'global auteurs' in Mexico. In his study of post-1989 Mexican cinema, Ignacio Sánchez-Prado explains how, in response to the socioeconomic transformations of the country, films from the neoliberal period exhibit the exhaustion of national cinema. He traces different ways in which recent Mexican cinema articulates its 'departure from Mexicanist models of representation' (2014: 211) that span from commercial romantic comedies to the transnational careers of directors like Alejandro González Iñárritu. What this gamut of styles share in common is the aim to break away from Mexicanism by deploying globalised ways of filmmaking. In this way, for Sánchez-Prado, the cinema of the neoliberal period has managed to engage with contemporary issues through different formal strategies. He pays special attention to the role of Mexican auteurs in this context and explains how 'authorial cinema, particularly the brand that has emerged in the wake of the visibility of Carlos Reygadas and of the increasing presence of Mexican films on the international festival circuit, has begun to more frontally engage social themes' (2014: 217).

The rise of Mexican global auteurs constitutes part of this process of unpicking Mexicanism by participating in global film cultures, in this case by means of resisting Americanization (2014: 158). The aforementioned category of global art cinema serves as a fertile ground for Mexican filmmakers to respond to the pressures of the international market and to reach global circulation. Simultaneously, the transformations of the Mexican film industry during the neoliberal period have also enabled the emergence of auteur films locally, despite their thorough departure from the mainstream Mexican cinematic practices and of the limited audiences they find in the domestic market. As Sánchez-Prado suggests, the transformations of the Mexican film industry in the post-1989 period facilitated the emergence of 'a plurality of commercial and creative spaces' in which new cinematic practices like these could appear. In other words, 'if neoliberalism produces, at a certain level, a homogenization of cultural texts (such as the romantic comedy aesthetic), the intersection of capital and globalization also creates a diversification of audiences and cultural products' (2014: 196). Film theatres started to target middle-class audiences instead of popular ones, which some private investors perceived as an opportunity to support the distribution and exhibition of art house films. Neoliberalism presumably created a market niche for auteur cinema which rests on audiences trying to avoid Hollywood blockbusters and commercial Mexican films. Simultaneously, the public Mexican Cineteca has made great efforts to preserve and promote cinema in México, cultivating a cinephile audience that allowed new independent production companies to thrive.

The production and distribution company of *Halley*, Mantarraya, epitomises the rise of the auteur niche in Mexico. Mantarraya started as a small production house to support the films

of young Mexican directors such as Amat Escalante, Reygadas, and later Sebastián Hofmann.[5] These directors share a similar slow and minimalist auteur style as well as international recognition in film festivals. Significantly, besides the support of the Mexican Film Institute, Mantarraya also receives funding from international institutions such as the Huber Balls Fund of the Rotterdam Film Festival (2014: 206). More recently, Mantarraya has also become a distribution company for international directors in Mexico, promoting the films of some of the most renowned contemporary auteurs, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Bela Tarr, Lisandro Alonso, and Claire Denis, to name a few.[6]

In this way, Mexican auteur films like *Halley* are unavoidably inscribed in this network of global art cinema. They belong to a community of global auteurs that often influence one another aesthetically, that tend to cite the same genealogy of directors as their aesthetic references, and that have a strong presence in the international festival circuit. This context sheds a new light on Hofmann's comparison of *Halley* to other Mexican films. For Hofmann, his film is too 'different' from most of Mexican and Latin American cinema, which, in his own words 'tends to be political or social, or simply too realistic' (Vértiz de la Fuente 2013). Yet *Halley* cannot be detached from its local industry, specifically from the Mexican auteur niche. The film can instructively be paired with similar Mexican works such as *The Untamed* (Escalante 2017) and *Post Tenebras Lux* (Reygadas 2014), both of which combine tropes of subcultural excessive genres like horror and fantasy movies with their auteurial style.

In sum, then, Mexican auteurs like Hofmann cannot be considered merely as individual creatives: they sit at the intersections between the local industry and global art cinema. Pairing these films in the context of the post-1989 Mexican industry enables a transnational account of film categorization, particularly in the case of auteur films infused with subcultural genre tropes. At the same time, *Halley* integrates the paradigm of global art cinema. In this sense, further exploration of the allegorical use of subcultural genres made by global auteurs would be insightful, particularly with a transnational approach.

In this section I have offered a cultural-industrial account of *Halley* to illustrate how the combination of auteurist stylistic choices and cinematic elements associated with subcultural genres allow the film to participate in global art cinema. The following section consists of a closer aesthetic reading of both the zombie genre tropes and the auteurist style in *Halley*. First I analyse the living-dead body in the film to elucidate its political significance, considering the transnational tensions between centre and periphery to understand the zombified body. Secondly I explore its allegorical implications in the context of global capitalism.

Victim or subversive?
The living-dead body in global capitalism

The insistence of critics to relate the film to the zombie might also be framed in the context of the genre's renaissance in the last few years. In mainstream culture, especially in North America, 'zombies have become a hot commodity' since the beginning of the 2000s (Pielak and Cohen 2017: 1) and thus have received great attention in film and media scholarship. This popularity helps to explain why most of the reviews of *Halley* referencing the genre came from Europe and the United States. These monsters serve to express the 'underlying fears and anxieties of our

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[5] The complete list of Mantarraya's produced films can be found in their website: http://mantarraya.com/mantarrayaproduccion

[6] All the films distributed by Mantarraya appear on their website: http://mantarraya.com/mantarrayadist

culture,' of western culture to be more precise (Pielak and Cohen 2017: 32). Trapped in the material world as a living dead, Beto certainly experiences the main defining conflict of a zombie in spite of how the film differs from the genre. Yet *Halley* emerges in a different context from mainstream American zombie fiction, as discussed in the previous section, so it departs from how the genre makes political commentaries in the west. With this in mind, it is instructive to trace the genealogy of the zombie as a signifier to understand how *Halley* creates political claims through Beto's living-dead materiality, since the political meaning of zombies has changed overtime significantly.

These monsters originate from Afro-Caribbean folklore, but most of the connotations associated with them in contemporary popular culture today result from how Christian colonisers appropriated them (Olney 2017: 18). Originally, for the colonised communities in the Caribbean such as the practitioners of Voodoo, 'zombification was a source of horror' because 'it represented an extension in death of the bondage they suffered in life.' In other words, zombification 'pressed them into perpetual servitude' for the oppressor (Olney 2017: 16). In this approach, the zombie constitutes a victim more than a monster, as it embodies the sufferings of oppression and it does not aim to harm others. Only later did the zombie turn into a threat for society instead of its sufferer. It soon became a 'raced horror monster' used to defend the interests of colonizing powers. Starting with the book *The Magic Island* (William Seabrook, 1929), white colonisers appropriated zombie mythology and added the savage qualities that still appear in contemporary popular fiction today. This process served to culturally support 'the racist and imperialist discourse' surrounding the occupation of different Caribbean countries, such as Haiti (12), because it reinforced the narrative that locals were savages that needed to be 'civilised' by the white colonisers.

But zombie literature and cinema continued to evolve with different political shifts. Remarkable examples of the re-appropriation of this monster are American blaxploitation films form the seventies. Since the 2000s, mainstream western zombie fiction seems to aim to absorb this political potential. Even though some of the recent popular culture has been 'complicit of neo-colonialism,' most zombie films have become 'witting or unwitting critiques of the racial and cultural tyranny perpetuated by modern forms of imperialism' (Olney 2017: 39-40). In other words, most zombie culture criticises how the predominantly white system is the real monster, as it constantly produces living-dead creatures. Contemporary zombie movies hardly ever reference the Afro-Caribbean origins of this monster, but its political potential emerges continuously. As Sarah Juliet Lauro claims, 'the zombie refuses to be a palimpsest: its history bleeds through our attempts to write over it' (2015: 192). However, its political commentary has taken a different meaning in contemporary fiction. As introduced above, the most common use of the zombie in contemporary mainstream media serves to reflect 'the culture that creates them,' or in other words, to address cultural and social concerns (Pielak and Cohen 2017: 2). Pressing issues such as overpopulation, epidemics, or environmental disasters can be addressed in these films implicitly or explicitly because 'the zombie apocalypse (…) is a reflection of the state of our [western] civilization' (Pielak and Cohen 2017: 3). Zombies incarnate all those issues and exaggerate them to make them more visible for the audience. The monster is a product of a sick society, its most palpable evidence. However, in a way, the zombie also serves to express the fear of experiencing the failure of the system, the 'anxiety that the world is not working.' In mainstream zombie fiction, this fear is calmed by killing the monster in the cinematic universe (Pielak and Cohen 2017: 3). Thus, I contend that the scope of the political commentary in this dominant approach to the zombie in contemporary cinema remains limited, while the most

subcultural articulations of the genre tend to be the most subversive. First, the monster still constitutes an 'other' separate from 'us.' Even though the zombie results from a failed system, it is portrayed as a threat rather than a victim. Secondly, this fear of confirming the collapse of the system shows acritical nostalgia for the pre-zombie past, even though it is the very context that created the monster on the first place.

Significantly, Hofmann has admitted that, although his intentions were not to make a zombie film, *Halley* exhibits a zombiefied society. The meaning of zombification has shifted greatly from colonialization and slavery to global capitalism, but *Halley* reformulates some of its original elements while reversing others. First, Beto resembles the living dead victim of the colonialized communities more than the uncivilised monster in imperialist literature. Even after death, he has to endure his harsh reality as a lonely working-class man in the big city. Thus the original meaning of zombie folklore enables a critical examination of the character's impossibility to die fully. In fact, when a mortician discovers Beto's secret, the protagonist affirms that he has felt that way for his entire life, which mirrors the idea of zombification as an extension of the sufferings of life after passing away. The lack of nostalgia for the pre-zombie past in *Halley* marks a clear departure from the genre conventions of dominant popular zombie fiction.

Secondly, Beto does not aim to attack anybody: he is innocent on a moral level and the film presents him as inoffensive. As a result, he is not a threat but a victim. His body in decomposition highlights his solitude and invites an allegorical reading of exploitative labour. At the same time, Beto's physicality constitutes a failure in the capitalist economy. The globalised metropolis has completely isolated him, turning his job into his only connection with his environment. In that regard, Beto constitutes a perfect obedient worker, only invested in being part of the production system. However, he can no longer endure the tasks of a security guard and is forced to resign. As Gorfinkel argues in her analysis of tired bodies in film, the failed embodiment of this character offers a political possibility: his decomposing state challenges the utilitarian function of bodies in capitalism (2012: 315). The (non-)act of being physically dead gains new ideological implications. The auteurist slow narrative tempo contributes to this subversive element of Beto's conflict, as much of the film depicts Beto doing nothing.

Beto is not the self-regulated man who makes for the ideal worker anymore. His organic matter has taken over his individuality, turning him into unproductive 'human waste' for society. The figure of the homo sacer can better elucidate the relevance of Beto's physical state in the film, as it also problematizes the division between life and death. The homo sacer is a figure of ancient Roman law that referred to the criminal who the state did not sacrifice, but who anybody could kill without penalty. Agamben's exploration of this figure extends Hannah Arendt's idea that 'a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man' (1973: 300). To put it simply, Arendt considers that a human being needs to have rights to have rights, to exist as citizens with political status and legal recognition, not only as natural human beings. The homo sacer thus exists virtually dead, as their life can be taken at any time and has no value for the community. This subject has lost their rights, their status, and their categorization. As a result, the homo sacer only exists as matter, because they have lost their 'qualified life' that characterises citizens (Agamben 1998: 9). The homo sacer only counts on what Agamben calls 'bare life,' which draws from Arendt's idea of the 'abstract nakedness' of human beings to refer to their biological life, to their physical existence as material bodies (Agamben 1998: 16). This ancient figure becomes useful to understand the presence of the body in contemporary capitalism, as one of the main concerns of

the modern state is to regulate biological (bare) life. In a contemporary context, the homo sacer serves to understand the existence of subjects with diminished agency who do not fully qualify as citizens and who are, as Arendt pointed, fully or partially devoid of rights. With these notions in mind, for Agamben, the politicization of bare life implies its simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the political sphere, as is the case of the homo sacer and of Beto, whose body makes him exist in a sort of limbo.

Along these lines, the art cinema aesthetics of the film deprive Beto of his sense of 'qualified life' as an individual. In addition to the narrative reformulation of the zombie, Hofmann deploys auteurist formal operations that facilitate a further allegorical figuration of the living-dead body. Like the homo sacer, Beto is trapped between life and death and the aesthetics of the film portray him as such. Contemplative close-ups of his wounds highlight the importance of his material presence in the film. Even worms and flies appear in his decomposing body, which the camerawork portrays with very shallow depth of field. Beto's 'bare life' is inscribed in the film's portrayal of his materiality. Despite his obsession with hiding his condition, nobody seems to notice Beto's undeniable decay. The allegorical figuration of his living-dead body evokes the homo sacer, who is part of the system only to be excluded from it. Similarly, Beto is part of the capitalist metropolis only to become marginalised within it. The production design and the camerawork aestheticize Beto's 'bare life' to signify his diminished agency.

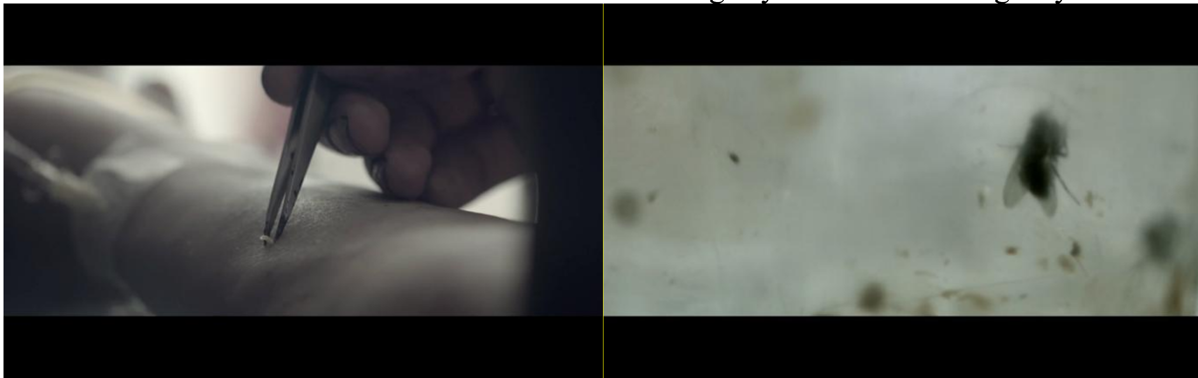

Figure 3. Close-ups highlighting Beto's physicality.

A significant scene in the film stages Beto's parallelism with the homo sacer more literally. Beto's exclusion and the indifference of his environment become apparent during one of his commutes to work. His pain grows visibly unbearable and he keeps bending over as he tries to walk. His decaying flesh takes over, undermining his previous efforts to hide his deterioration. Eventually he falls on the ground to the indifference of the bystanders, who ignore him and continue their commute. This scene is technically the least polished in the film: shot in the subway of Mexico City with a slight documentary approach, the camera movements and use of focus do not flow as smoothly as in the rest of the film. This scene was initially not intended to develop this way and it was only made possible because of the auteurist production mode of the film. Hofmann realised that none of the passengers would stop to assist Beto and he decided to keep filming longer than he had planned to document the situation. By capturing this moment, the filmmakers accidentally created what Hofmann considers 'a sociological experiment' which adds to the film's social critique by confirming the apathy of the bystanders in the non-diegetic universe (Mendoza 2013). In spite of the technical difficulties of filming this scene, the cinematography masterfully reinforces the character's isolation and evokes the homo sacer, who is left to their own devices and at the mercy of society's will. The lighting and colour palette of

the subway rest on cold tones and, at some points, Beto is completely out of focus. The film thus seems as apathetic as the witnesses around him, as it highlights their lack of compassion instead of Beto's emotions. This scene exemplifies the film's lack of empathy for the character, reinforcing the idea that Beto exists like the homo sacer, virtually dead but still alive, in a society that excludes him and reduces him to matter. Agamben's study of the homo sacer in modern capitalism looks at extreme examples of loss of qualified life in the twentieth century, such as concentration camps, suggesting that these exceptional examples of bare life explain societal systems. However, as this unplanned scene exemplifies, *Halley* shows traces of the homo sacer in the everyday, in common locations of urban life, simultaneously inside and outside of the system.

Figure 4. A documentary moment. Beto faints at the subway and nobody assists him.

Despite this oppression, which combines capitalist exploitation with the exclusion of the homo sacer, Beto resists in his elusive body. Morally, he constitutes a conforming worker; materially, his flesh embodies pure disobedience, as his body rebels against the clinical definition of death. Following the scene at the subway, the film shows one of its narrative climaxes when an ambulance takes Beto to the hospital. After a significant ellipsis of the moment in which the doctors presumably declare him dead on arrival, the scene takes places at the morgue. The mortuary worker bathes him carefully, almost in a ritualistic manner. Beto is then able to wake up and the mortician confronts the situation with striking spontaneity. While he eats his meal, which he offers to Beto in case he is hungry, he talks about his lonely lifestyle. As a reaction to people's alienation, the mortuary worker prefers to spend time at the morgue, where he is 'in good company.' It is during this revelatory encounter when Beto confesses that 'it feels like it has always been like this,' confirming that his zombification only extends his pre-existing situation, presumably marked by loneliness and reduced political agency. The mortician tries to help Beto and tells him about the decomposing bodies of the other corpses in the morgue. Eventually, with a smile, he states 'I knew this was possible, you are very lucky.' With a combination of solitude and genuine care, he asks Beto to stay longer and to take care of himself. This scene drastically collapses André Bazin's imperatives regarding the impossibility to represent death in film, but not with sadistic ambitions. Instead, this scene epitomises the main issues at stake in the film. The mortician exemplifies the failure of capitalist society to maintain human connection. Both of the characters are extremely lonely to the point that the mortuary worker prefers corpses to 'regular' people. Eating, for instance, is an act that usually involves socialization, but the fast-paced life in urban areas is turning it into a more individual activity. Most importantly, this scene shows society's failure at caring for its members, as Beto only receives care and compassion 'after' death. This moment exemplifies how the capitalist system directly negates the 'society of care' or the 'city of care' theorised by interdisciplinary

researchers like Mayte Sancho. In this societal model of communal living, mutual care constitutes the main foundation of the group's social dynamics.

The cinematic portrayal of Beto's exclusion in his liminal state rests on some of the most auteurist stylistic choices of the film which depart from traditional genre conventions. First, the aspect ratio, framing, and composition aesthetically evoke the failure of collective coexistence and care. The horizontal screen serves to frame the character in the centre of the shot, surrounded by a big empty space that highlights his solitude. The compositions create sharp square geometrical shapes that oppose Beto's organic matter violently. This use of cinematography and mise-en-scène reflects how the dehumanization of society oppresses the individual in its organic presence. Furthermore, the set design and lighting deploy the same cold, sterile tones throughout the entire film. Such colours belong in spaces like the morgue or a hospital, but they appear everywhere in the film to suit Beto's point of view, as he suffers from cataracts in his eyes. With this diegetic justification, the colour palette in the film turns every urban space into a potential clinic. The cinematography makes the disparity between Beto's body and the medicalization of biological matter apparent, yet the film removes doctors from the plot completely. They represent structures of knowledge about the body that do not serve to explain Beto's state. The categorizations of the medical system cannot control Beto's materiality, which escapes the logic of the clinic. The mortuary worker, however, naturalises his situation, guided by his own experience and not by theorization of death. With his appreciation for the decomposing corpses, the mortician represents the prevalence of organic matter, a subversive recognition of bare life, of the physicality of the bodies over their conceptualization. In *Halley*, despite signifying the loss of rights, physical embodiment overrides biological classifications such as life or death.

Figure 5. Geometric compositions surrounding Beto's body.

Beto incarnates victimhood and rebellion simultaneously. On the one hand, like the zombie or the homo sacer, he remains trapped between life and death and cannot escape his material world. On the other hand, his embodiment does not conform to the concept of death. *Halley* rebels against Foucault's idea of bio-power. Even though Agamben and Foucault approach the physical body differently, they both agree, to a certain extent, that the presence of biological life in the political sphere intensified in the wake of modernity (Agamben 1998: 11). For Agamben, ancient law and culture settled the tradition of this process centuries ago, while Foucault limits the scope of his argument to modernity (Norris 2005: 2). In any case, before that, Western societies focused on the qualified life of the citizen instead of their natural (material) life. Foucault explains how bio-politics result from the inclusion of biological life in structures and mechanisms of power. Bio-power then constitutes the control and administration of the living body through political strategies. The first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (1976) elaborates the idea of bio-power in relationship to sex. *Halley*

challenges society's bio-power, which, according to Foucault, constitutes the oppressive capability of scientific discourse about the human body. Analysing how institutions have controlled sexual practices, Foucault concludes that the power that controls bodies in modernity is the discourse itself, the will for knowledge that characterises western science. Scientific knowledge has taken the place of moral repression of the body that Christianity effectuated in the past (Foucault 1998: 54). For him, medical science thus substitutes prohibition and controls bodies through classification and intelligibility (1998: 57). This idea, which initially applies to sex but extends to the body as a whole, grew in the name of medical and historical urgency with underlying political interests that, for example, could justify state racism or colonial practices (1998: 68). Medical science became the substitute of moral and religious structures of power, inflicting oppression on bodies. For Foucault, the creation of sexuality as a science, the medicalization of sex, exemplifies this exercise of bio-power. Bio-politics crucially served to manage the natural bodies of the population for the development of capitalism, to ensure that the bodies would participate in the productive system in a controlled manner (1998: 170). According to his reading, the articulation of discourses about what is true regarding the body constitutes the ultimate mechanism of control over natural life in modernity.

Halley's subversive potential lies in how the film confronts bio-power directly. By introducing elements of zombie cinema, the film creates the illusion that a material body can be dead and alive at the same time. In this diegetic universe, Beto's body has no fixed biological essence. It collapses bio-political classifications of life and death as well as of sex, since he still experiments desire in spite of his physical decay. Foucault juxtaposes the production of sexuality as a Western scientific discourse to the idea of *ars erotica*, prevalent in numerous cultures such as China, Japan, or India (1998: 72). In his account, the understanding of sex in *ars erotica* is based on experience itself and thus it does not aim to define irrevocable truths. It relies on a more fluid and heterogeneous approach to the human body that opposes the standardization of embodiment in medical science. The character of the mortician might be considered more insightfully with this contrast in mind. Significantly, the film plays with horror movie tropes again: the mortician surprises the audience because he does not get scared when Beto wakes up at the morgue. Instead, the corpse that comes back to life is met with this character's spontaneity and, what is more, with his kindness. The mortuary worker simply believes what he witnesses and claims that he intuited that being dead and alive was in fact possible. This character is not interested in knowing about Beto in scientific terms. His natural reaction rejects Foucault's 'will for knowledge' implicitly. Alternatively, he understands and accepts the organic qualities of the material body without worrying about its theorization. The line of dialogue 'you are very lucky' thus challenges the clinic: Beto cannot produce, he cannot be contained, but he still exists and has managed to overcome the power devices that oppress his body. As a result, Beto's physicality offers a deconstruction of bio-politics.

In addition, Beto's ultimate crossing to the afterlife, which occurs at the end of the film, incorporates a deconstruction of masculinity. With its focus on embodiment, *Halley* underscores the toxic over-identification with the body in capitalist societies. Not only does Beto work as a security guard, a traditionally gendered profession which requires the physical strength he no longer has. What is more, Beto works at a gym where all kinds of bodies exercise. In this diegetic universe, Beto's exists in the most inappropriate space for his body. The film thus juxtaposes his decaying anatomy to the active bodies of the athletes. With his physical condition, Beto becomes free from societal control over the body, which can include the sports industry.

The exercise routine of the gym's clients mirrors Beto's healing ritual. While all of them aim to improve their physicality, Beto's concern with his body is purely practical.

It must be noted that he is unable to perform sexually due to his decomposition. His desire for his boss marks a crucial subplot in the film and thus the diegesis privileges male subjectivity unequivocally. The film shows the anomia of urban Mexican society and it foregrounds the experience of a male individual and his approach to heterosexual desire. However, to conclude that *Halley* is a film about male subjectivity in urban Mexico would constitute an oversimplification, because its underlying political subtext goes beyond how social indifference affects the Mexican man. Its portrayal of Beto's desire offers an alternative articulation of sexuality as well as dominant constructions of masculinity that questions scientific discourses. First, in his state, he would be medically unable to experience desire and his sexual activity deviates from the bio-political norm as much as his body does. But most importantly, the film represents the death of the phallus explicitly. After spending time with Luly, Beto returns to his apartment and tries to masturbate but fails dramatically. Due to his physical disintegration, his attempt results in the involuntary mutilation of his penis, which initially occurs off-screen. The following image is a frontal long shot of the character sitting naked on the ground, with his absent penis taking the centre of the frame. The absence of the phallus becomes violently apparent as the remaining wound occupies the centre of the composition. Thus, Beto's elusive embodiment intervenes politically to deconstruct masculinity in the film, both in physical and symbolic terms.

Figure 6. The mutilation of Beto's body. The symbolic death of his masculinity.

The final scene in the film represents Beto's final journey with allegoric landscapes, immediately after his mutilation. The last few shots portray the empty landscape of Greenland's icebergs from a moving boat. These shots, which show nature for the first time in the film, embody the complete opposite from Mexico City or any other metropolis. The beautiful blue, teal, and purple colours of the sea and the sky have nothing to do with the electric pale tones of the city. Only Beto appears in one of the shots, the last of the film, facing away from the camera. The film eventually shows Beto reaching a metaphorical landscape that evokes freedom from the metropolis in the same way than the afterlife would symbolise freedom for the original zombie. Significantly, the contrast between Mexico City and this Nordic landscape presented in the film shall not be read merely as a demonization of urban spaces and a simultaneous idealization of the rural world. Instead, the icebergs in Greenland evoke a world outside of the system in which Beto was trapped throughout the film, a symbolic space that is not bound to the restrictions of global capitalism.

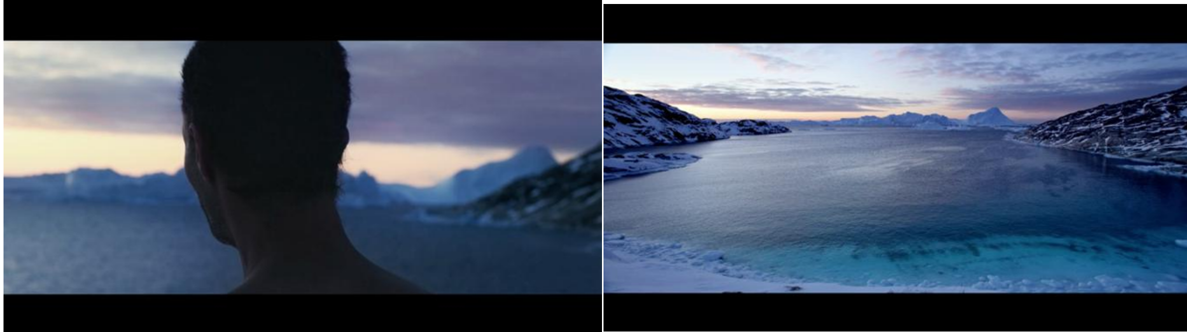

Figure 7. Beto transcends the immanent world.

Right before this evocative scene, during his time with Luly, she lets him know about her loneliness, her aspirations in life, and her expectations to remain long term friends. In a rather emotive scene, she uses a flashlight to simulate the trajectory of Halley's comet on her wall. As the fake comet moves, she describes the major events in her life and her encounters with Beto in time. At the end of her monologue she states 'here is where you die… and then here is where I die…and the comet comes back to Earth here… and then it keeps going all alone.' The flashlight then illuminates Beto's face, who is visibly moved and about to cry, showing an emotional reaction for the first time in the film. The scene makes a concession to Beto's loneliness. This intimate moment of connection and his subsequent mutilation encapsulate the essence of the film: a cry against solitude and bio-power in modernity. In the end, Beto crosses the limits of his material reality by eradicating his loneliness and by overcoming the bio-politics imposed on him.

Ultimately, Beto can only be free from his oppressive reality when he gets over the discourses about the body and masculinity inscribed on him by structures of bio-power. In *Halley*, Beto resembles the original zombie and departs from the more commercial version of the monster: he is not a threat, but a victim of an oppressive system. Yet even in his disempowered position, his embodiment has subversive potential because of how his body reconciles the disparities between Agamben's homo sacer and Foucault's bio-politics. His body rebels against the bio-power that oppresses him, turning his bare life into an act of subversion. This way, he eventually receives the liberation for which Caribbean zombies longed: he can finally pass away and be freed from the suffering endured in his oppressive reality. In *Halley*, stylistic themes associated with zombie movies and art cinema bind together a universe in which oppression and subversion coexist. Through the combination of uncanny genre tropes and auteurist cinematic operations, *Halley* participates in global art cinema's development of a new political aesthetic whose aim is to exhibit and challenge the diminished agency of individuals in global capitalism.

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