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OF AXOLOTL, VULNERABLE BODIES AND TRANSNATIONAL
HISTORY POLITICS: NEOBAROQUE REPRESENTATION
OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN BORDERLAND IDENTITY
IN THE FILM *BARDO, FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL
OF TRUTHS* BY ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU

The axolotl heralds the epoch of Gödel's theorem: the more
consistent the world becomes thanks to modern reason, the
more evident it becomes that some truths exist which elude
the dominant system.

Roger Bartra, *Cage of Melancholy*

Your dedication is a pretense? Our pretense is a dedication.
Someone must appear to believe.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Success has been my biggest failure.

Silverio

In a brief interview about his film *Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths* (2022) for the Italian cinema journal *Ciak Magazine*, Alejandro González Iñárritu pays homage to Federico Fellini and, with what might seem almost a cliché Mexican gesture, as if entrusts himself into the care of a patron saint of cinema, believing that the late Italian director “will protect” his film, while he himself will be granted a haven in the “cinematic cathedral” of Fellini’s work. Iñárritu further observes to the reviewer that

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Bardo would be very boring if it were his autobiography and refers to the film as an “emography,” an emotional biography that draws on the mutual permeation of dream and reality, as in the films of Federico Fellini, Luis Buñuel, the Swedish director Roy Andersson and the Chilean-French director Alejandro Jodorowsky. These filmmakers played freely with representations of time and space that would evoke inner, dream-like psychological experience. Therefore, alluding to the line from *The Tempest* by Shakespeare “we are such stuff as dreams are made on,”¹ Iñárritu aptly observes that these masters demonstrated that there is an affinity between the reality of films and that of dreams.² *Bardo*’s cinematic language shows that the filmmaker also invokes the cinematic oeuvre of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky (in particular the films *The Mirror* [1975] and *Nostalghia* [1983]) and the Polish director Wojciech Jerzy Has (in particular the films *Saragossa Manuscript* [1965] and *The Hourglass Sanatorium* [1973]). These inspirations facilely place *Bardo* among films that rely on neobaroque aesthetics.³

In Tibetan philosophy, *Bardo* is conceived of as an intermediate state of forty-nine days’ duration between death and rebirth.⁴ Therefore, Iñárritu’s use of the term immediately implies the filmmaker’s emphasis on affectively charged “in-between” spaces and states of mind in his emography. Consequently, my reading of Iñárritu’s film is an inquiry into the director’s skillful employment of the tension between major and minor strategy of neobaroque representation in *Bardo* in order to give expression to the complexities of the borderland identity of Mexican-American emigrants—in particular Silverio

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001), IV, 1. 156–57.

² Alejandro González Iñárritu, “Alejandro Iñárritu: I Hope Fellini Will Protect My Film,” interview by Oscar Cosulich, *Ciak Magazine. Ciak in Mostra*, 2022, <https://www.ciakmagazine.it/ciak-in-mostra/ciak-in-mostra-2022-category/inarritu-fellini-protégga-il-mio-film-2>.

³ See Cristina Degli-Esposti, “Federico Fellini’s Intervista or the Neo-Baroque Creativity of the Analysand on Screen,” *Italica* 73, no. 2 (1996): 157–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/479361>; Zofia Kolbuszewska, “From a Gothic Text to a Neobaroque Cinema: Wojciech Jerzy Has’s Adaptation of James Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*,” *Lublin Studies in Modern Languages and Literature* 2 (2019): 145–56, <https://journals.umcs.pl/lsmll/article/view/7695>; Kristen Kreider and James O’Leary, “Time, Place and Empathy: The Poetics and Phenomenology of Andrei Tarkovsky’s Film Image,” *Visual Studies* 28, no. 1 (2013): 1–16, <http://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2013.765183>; James Ramey, “Baroque Buñuel: The Hidden Culteranismo in *UnChien andalou*,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 93, no. 4 (2016): 1–32, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/4753820.2016.1184014>; Odile Tremblay, “Alejandro Jodorowsky, le phénix baroque,” *Le Devoir*, April 26, 2014, <https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/406583/alejandro-jodorowsky-le-phenix-baroque>.

⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, “The Tibetan Book Of The Dead: Psychological Commentary,” trans. R. F. C. Hull, in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Or The After-Death Experiences on the Bardo Plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub’s English Rendering*, ed. W. Y. Evans-Wentz (Oxford: OUP, 2000), xxv.

Gama and his family members—and its entanglement in the legacy of the myth of Mexicanness with its axolotl symbolism. The concept of the “neobaroque”⁵ which I engage in discussing the film, entails the use of the notion of “imago,” introduced by William Egginton in *The Theater of Truth* (2010), the idea of “major vs. minor representation strategy” put forward by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), later adopted and developed by Monika Kaup and Egginton, as well as examining “the axolotl canon” based on the melancholy/metamorphosis archetype interrogated by Roger Bartra in *The Cage of Melancholy* (1992).

Iñárritu subjects the hybrid colonial legacy of the national Mexican culture and the counterconquest thrust inherent in the New World baroque to an altogether new level of carnivalization in *Bardo*. He achieves this by blending his multiple literary and cinematic inspirations as well as motifs from Mexico’s pre-Columbian past, arising from the debunking of the nationalist interpretation of Cortez’s conquest, and from the history of military conflicts with the United States.

Undoubtedly, one of Iñárritu’s important inspirations is Julio Cortazar’s short story “Axolotl” (1963) in which the narrator, Cortazar’s porte-parole, contemplates on multiple occasions Aztec visages of axolotls kept in a fish-tank in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Soon he transforms into one, too, and starts observing his human self examine axolotls from the outside. Simultaneously, he scans the world at large from the amphibian perspective through the glass plate of the fishtank, as if through a camera lens. Likewise, Iñárritu creates the character of a filmmaker-journalist Silverio, his porte-parole, in order to watch Silverio examine his own life in an emographic para-documentary. In paying tribute to the Argentinian writer, *Bardo*’s director assumes himself the role of an amphibian mestizo narrator. On the visual plane, the significance of the allusion to Cortazar’s short story is delightfully captured by a close-up of an Aztec pyramid, shot as looming behind the tank of axolotls owned by Silverio’s son, mysteriously lit by a greenish light.

Even as Iñárritu’s films are classified as examples of liberal transnational cinema made by an independent director with “global auteurist ambitions,”⁶

⁵ Following the example of Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), I adopt the spelling “neobaroque” rather than “neo-baroque” in my discussion of *Bardo*; other usages may appear in the quoted material. For the genealogy of the neobaroque, see Monika Kaup, “Becoming-Baroque: Folding Forms into the New World Baroque with Alejo Carpentier,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5, no 2. (2005): 107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949481>.

⁶ Deborah Shaw, *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo Del Toro*,

and employ “an implied world cinema gaze,”⁷ the cinematic poetics and aesthetics of *Bardo* are certainly immersed in the tradition of the Mexican “baroque *imaginaire*.” It keeps inducing “a chronic hallucinatory state” due to the Catholic Church’s exploitation of “visionary and dream experience—such as special effects—to inculcate the worship of images” thus instituting the collapse of “the boundaries that we habitually assign to reality and hallucination.”⁸ Gruzinski points to the exploitation of the mechanisms of the baroque imaginary by the contemporary media environment and observes that: “The spiriting away of transcendence and religion in favor of consumerism—thus making what was only one of the results of the baroque *imaginaire* an end unto itself—is the abyss that separates Televisa [Mexico’s foremost television company] from the colonial machinery.”⁹ Nonetheless, “the baroque machinery had opened the way for the politics, machinery and effects of the image today” by, among other things, “creating a singular rapport to the image, making it the basis of a surreality into which the gaze could sink, that abolished the distance from prototype to reflection, *erasing the conditions of its production*.”¹⁰ The concept of the “neo-baroque” addresses best the contemporary media environment because “the individual and collective experiences of the image-consumers of the colonial era shed light on the ideas taking shape today, the margins that are breaking free, but also on the traps that this apparent freedom, this apparent disorder of the *imaginaire* dissimulate.”¹¹

Drawing on the critical works of William Egginton and Monika Kaup, I adopt in this article the term neobaroque as facilitating a discussion of baroque aesthetics as a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon, shaped by the tensions between (colonial and imperialist) centers and peripheries, as well as an expression of the heterogenous local culture of peripheries; a borderland culture of becoming, informed by the aesthetic strategies of

Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1–7, 154.

⁷ Shaw, *The Three Amigos*, 154.

⁸ Serge Gruzinski, *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492-2019)*, trans. Heather MacLean (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 160.

⁹ Gruzinski, 222.

¹⁰ Gruzinski, 225; emphasis added.

¹¹ Gruzinski, 225–26.

growth, transformation, hybridity, proliferation, disruption, and decay.¹² The neobaroque aesthetics shares with the baroque the taste

for specularity, reflexivity, and spectrality manifested in the obsession with mirrors as both a source of intriguing optical effects and an inexhaustible reservoir of analogies and examples. The mirror motif is related to the widespread taste for *mises en abyme*, elaborate framing devices (interpolated tales, pictures of pictures, plays within plays) that enable a work to incorporate its own image in the body of what it depicts. And it further coordinates with the major themes of dream and illusion, the era's compulsive interests in ghosts, twins and doubles, and the tireless manufacture of ironic reversals, strident antitheses and uncanny inversions dramatizing the deeply entrenched dualisms of baroque style—truth and falsehood, light and darkness, reason and passion, spirit and flesh.¹³

Borrowing the concept of minor strategy from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Egginton and Kaup posit a dialectical tension within the neobaroque aesthetics between the major and minor strategy of representation. The minor strategy takes the major strategy, that of the geo-political and cultural center of power, "at face value," pushing "the material medium of its figurative assumptions" to "absurd extremes"¹⁴ by amplifying its rules and mechanisms of operation. The political potential of the minor strategy consists in its "way of residing in the major strategy without accepting its fundamental assumptions."¹⁵ In questioning in *Bardo* the reductive, commercial application of the baroque machinery, Iñárritu simultaneously takes advantage of the media production conditions that blatantly rely on consumerism, thus availing himself of both the major and minor strategies of neobaroque representation.

Two most crucial episodes of *Bardo*'s narrative take place, respectively, in a dance hall, a site credited with a significant integrational and democratizing role in contemporary Mexican culture,¹⁶ where the success of Silverio's para-documentary *False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths* is celebrated, and

¹² William Egginton, "The Corporeal Image and the New World Baroque," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (2007): 108, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-abstract/106/1/107/3346/The-Corporeal-Image-and-the-New-World-Baroque>.

¹³ Christopher Braider, *Baroque Self-Invention and Historical Truth: Hercules at the Crossroads* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

¹⁴ Egginton, "The Corporeal Image," 115.

¹⁵ Egginton, 113.

¹⁶ María del Carmen Navarrete Torres, Cecilia García Muñoz Aparicio, Jenner Torrez Vázquez, "Los Salones De Baile En México Como Expresión De La Cultura Popular," *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Research* 6, no. 3 (2023): 170, <https://www.jthr.es/index.php/journal/article/view/501>.

on top of a heap of actors enacting dead Indian bodies, a centerpiece of that para-documentary's filmset. Silverio's award-winning film thus functions as an internal model, a *mise en abyme* of Iñárritu's movie. During one of the conversations held in the dance hall, Luis, a host of the most popular Mexican talk-show, ridicules the para-documentary for violating the hyper-realism of main-stream commercial media representation strategies. He blames the psychologically and politically charged highbrow aesthetics of the para-documentary on the filmmaker's compensating a shame about his minoritarian origin (Silverio was called a "negro" and an "Indian" as a child) and arrogantly flaunting his identity crises even as enjoying his life in the U.S. as a privileged Mexican emigrant.

Indeed, the viewer of *Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths* can, too, perceive Iñárritu's clever manipulation of the tension between major and minor representation strategies in order to defend his reputation as an alternative auteur director. The oneiric aesthetics of Silverio's para-documentary, coupled with its contemptuous assessment by the Mexican media mogul, play the role of a hall of distorting mirrors in *Bardo*. In this space of multiple reflections an excess of doublings, reflections, spectralized repetitions, and ironic reversals is produced. In the resulting vortex truth and illusion, history and myth, past and present, present and future, privilege and lack thereof, power and powerlessness, the Other and the same, the local and the transnational, uncannily dissimulate each other. The major strategy of Iñárritu's film masquerades as the minor strategy, cleverly assuming the appearance of its disruptive characteristics. Yet, the deconstructive power of the minor strategy is such, that in effect the majoritarian and minoritarian check each other thus generating an aesthetically pleasing tension between frenzied transformations and a melancholy immobilisation; a paradoxical dynamic stasis which informs the axolotl canon of the Mexican character.

Mythological twin brother of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, and an emblem of Mexicanness, axolotl is a "neotenic" salamander species. As a reproductive adult, axolotl retains its juvenile characteristics and the morphology of a larva.¹⁷ The mystery inherent in the axolotl's double nature of an "amphibian mestizo,"¹⁸ as well as "its repressed potential for metamorphosis are elements that facilitate the use of this curious animal as a figure to represent

¹⁷ Emily Wanderer, "The Axolotl in Global Circuits of Knowledge Production: Producing Multispecies Potentiality," *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 4 (2018), <https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/article/view/ca33.4.09/119>.

¹⁸ Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, trans. Christopher J. Hall (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 14.

the Mexican national character and the structures of political mediation it obscures.”¹⁹ Consequently, Bartra carves out of “the Mexican imagery of the national character” a subset of images that form “the canon of the axolotl,”²⁰ founded on the twin archetype of metamorphosis and melancholy. It invokes the figure of the axolotl that is simultaneously glorified as an expression of life and condemned to the role of a symbol, sign, and mask, “for ever trapped in the cage of melancholy.”²¹

Bardo encapsulates the transformation of the canon of the axolotl effected by the transnational cultural and economic politics in the Mexican-American borderland. Silverio’s para-documentary registers new images entering the canon: that of the “second class emigrants”—as juxtaposed with Silverio’s sarcastically acknowledged status of the “first class emigrant”—and that of the drug cartel boss. These two new models of “the Mexican character” remain in radical opposition to each other, and accurately showcase the significance of the U.S. as a center configuring anew the metamorphose and melancholy poles of the canon’s archetypal foundation.

Silverio’s coma after a stroke sustained in a carriage in Los Angeles metro provides the first external narrative frame for Iñárritu’s movie and lends itself to both naturalistic and mystical/magical readings. A condition of suspension between life and death is both medicalized as a state of physiological decline and interpreted spiritually as a soul’s quest for rebirth after death in *Bardo*. The tension between retro-activity and pro-activity is also constitutive of the middle narrative frame that is informed by Silverio’s persistent refusal to reconcile with the death of his infant son Matteo that occurred years earlier, and the filmmaker’s final acceptance of the child’s demise in the scene of ritual scattering of his ashes in the ocean at a beach in Mexico.

This narrative unfolds both on the realistic plane and in a series of fantastic scenes ranging from the surreal return of the newborn into the mother’s uterus in the maternity ward, through the interference of the foetus in the moments of sexual intimacy between Silverio and his wife, to the final release of a miniature sleeping Matteo, curled up in a fetal position, from a beautiful ornamental urn onto the ocean waves. The urn is less reminiscent of a funerary receptacle than of an exquisitely wrought Fabergé egg; a jeweler’s masterpiece which comes to symbolize the beginning of life even as it

¹⁹ Bartra, 7.

²⁰ Bartra, 7.

²¹ Bartra, 146.

is emblematic of the ritual scene's grotesque baroque artificiality. Shortly after, the oneiric episode fades into a realistically presented moment of actual scattering of Matteo's ashes, thus re-establishing the suspension between life and death, baroque artificiality and naturalism, as the patterns governing all levels of the film's diegesis.

The innermost narrative frame of *Bardo* consists of a series of alternating oneiric and realistic episodes associated with Silverio's Los Angeles metro trip to buy axolotls for his son; a trip that ends in the father's sustaining a stroke and falling into a coma. Of this frame the viewer can make sense only retroactively, after watching a scene towards the end of Iñárritu's film, wherein Silverio carries three axolotls in a plastic bag, bought in an aquarium shop as a belated gift to his son. Haunted by remorse, Silverio intends to replace Lorenzo's dead axolotls, which, afraid of loneliness, the boy illegally smuggled in his luggage years earlier, when moving from Mexico to the U.S.

Likewise, past and present are confused in the dance hall episode. In Silverio's conversations with party guests as well as during his spectral conversation with his deceased father in the dance hall's toilet, the public and the private intersect, the past and present overlap, and conflicts play out between the corrupt and the idealist, capitalist desire to engulf the totality of reality and the leftist ideals of social solidarity. Subsequently, Silverio takes a walk along a dark corridor that links the dance hall toilet with the apartment of his mother. Because the elderly woman suffers from dementia, their conversation is jumbled, and inevitably turns from family matters to the exploration of the complexities of aging, the physiology of bodily decline, and the phenomenology of memory loss. To his surprise, the filmmaker learns from his mother that the embodied memory of sexual intimacy, of sensuous experience, lasts the longest.

The door of his mother's apartment opens onto the filmset of Silverio's para-documentary, and the filmmaker walks towards Mexico City's biggest square, where a gigantic statue of Montezuma lies shattered, its fragments scattered nearby the heap of actors enacting dead Indian bodies, trampled on by an actor impersonating Cortez. Silverio climbs to the top of the heap and smokes a cigarette with the actor who histrionically recites lines from Octavio Paz (1914–1998), a diplomat, poet, writer of global fame, a Nobel Prize winner with strong ties to the U.S. The irony inherent in the juxtaposition of Cortez's rant on top of a body heap with the dementia suffered by the filmmaker's mother is inescapable. The loss of individual memory is compared to the national dementia; a loss of historical memory that calls for the

debunking of the mythologized national legacy. The paradoxical recognition, following Paz, of the origin of the Mexican nation in the Spanish conquest and the defeat of Montezuma's empire,²² is converted into a grotesque metacinematic performance in *Bardo*.

So is the staging of the origin of another myth, that of the Heroic Cadets (Niños Héroes), who, according to a legend, sacrificed their lives in a suicidal patriotic act of defending the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City during one of the last battles of the Mexican-American War in 1847.²³ In an ironic repetition of the nineteenth-century defeat, followed by forfeiting large swathes of Mexico sold beneath value to the U.S., Silverio overhears on the radio the breaking news that Amazon plans to purchase the Mexican Baja state. He is waiting in the Chapultepec Castle to be received by the American ambassador Jones; a surname ineluctably evoking Eugene O'Neill's play *Emperor Jones* (1920) and the 1933 musical film adaptation of the play with its themes of imperialist hegemony and the rise of decolonial authoritarianism. After the conversation, the filmmaker and the ambassador find themselves virtually in the middle of the Niños Héroes episode, the steps and the patio of the castle strewn with the dead bodies of young soldiers in both American and Mexican period uniforms. The American soldiers from the reenactment of the Chapultepec Castle siege reappear at the Los Angeles airport in the Immigration passport control desk episode. In this scene, after Silverio challenges an American Immigration officer, who questions the filmmaker's right to call the U.S. home, a detachment of American boys in nineteenth-century blue military uniforms appears to arrest the director. These grotesque scenes bring out the double structure of the Mexican imago as a product of the minor strategy of representing the transnational Mexican-American history politics.

Indeed, the complexities of Mexican identity captured by the canon of the axolotl overlap with the concept of the imago which designates a heterogeneous image created out of dispersed, unknown, and dissident reality to transmit a dialectical historical vision in the baroque and neobaroque.²⁴ The imago conveys the double-faced character of the baroque and neobaroque,

²² Octavio Paz, *In Light of India*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997), 76.

²³ Michael S. van Wagenen, *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Enduring Legacies of the U.S.-Mexican War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 47–51.

²⁴ Djelal Kadir, *Questing Fictions: Latin America's Family Romance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 22; José Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 9–10; Egginton, "The Corporeal Image," 110.

their centrifugality inseparable from centripetality, and emerges precisely at the point of illusion/dissolution of the self's image, where the truth is contained and produced by the illusion that conceals it. Egginton explicates the duality of this perspective by pointing out that the imago functions like a frame in a trompe l'oeil painting that "marks the illusory border separating the viewer from a promised glory in a nonexistent space beyond."²⁵

Silverio encounters his double/himself in a desert, in an episode reminiscent of a famous scene in the *Saragossa Manuscript* directed by the Polish filmmaker Wojciech Jerzy Has. In Has' film, an eighteenth-century character, a captain of the Walloon guards in the service of the Spanish king, freezes in terror on catching sight of a specular image of his double. The dynamic dialectical structure of the imago is thus translated into the visual language of cinema—as an encounter of doubles who reside each on either side of the mirror-like plate of glass. Unlike Has' film, in *Bardo*, Silverio's double associated with the imago's perspective predicated on the main strategy—the power of the center, transnational fame, and residential American visa—unexpectedly joins the crowds of those marginalized, underprivileged, and manifests solidarity with the embodied vulnerability of the Other. But, the camera follows instead Silverio's dreaming double, associated with the imago's perspective predicated on the carnivalizing aesthetics of the minor strategy, capturing him, surprisingly, in a decisively non-minoritarian act of transcending his material, economical and political circumstances.

Bardo's ending takes us back to its very beginning. The viewer can only see a fleeting shadow cast by Silverio flying over an empty desert landscape and leaving behind the unrelenting struggle of the emigrants seeking to reach the Mexican-American border. Not only does his flight oneirically transcend the material conditions of his own life, but also eclipses the concrete economic and political conditions of the production of his media narratives. *Bardo's* plot thus comes full circle. Nothing has really changed. Not unlike Silverio in his coma, we, Iñárritu's viewers, are all trapped in a kind of a *Bardo* by means of this narrative ploy; arrested between life and death, between Mexico and America.

Admittedly, Silverio is not any Mexican, but a rather privileged, "first-class emigrant," as he observes in a conversation with his son. His success as a filmmaker of transnational fame proves his value to the center whose culture, especially the media, radiates globally. Indeed, Silverio's mestizo identity affords him an insight into the workings of the neobaroque repres-

²⁵ William Egginton, *The Theater of Truth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 88.

entation machinery, along with its affective intensity; an insight that he brings to the center as a gift. After all, the neobaroque effects a reversal of the flow of the symbolic capital sent from the center to the peripheries, generated from exploiting those peripheries, their cultures and resources.²⁶

Yet, privileged as he may be, Silverio's identity can hardly be comprehended without acknowledging that the condition of *Bardo*, the state of being poised between life and death, between metamorphosis and melancholy, is in point of fact a mirror reflection of the circumstances examined by Roger Bartra under the rubric of the axolotl canon. Of course, Silverio being Iñárritu's porte-parole and *Bardo* his emography, it is very likely that in the end, this is precisely how ambiguous (the oxymoronic meaning intended) Iñárritu must *feel* about his own, multi-dimensional borderland identity. The neobaroque aesthetics employed by the filmmaker in the emography brings out this ambiguous, multilayered affective enmeshment in the global media marketplace and its commodification processes. Yet, simultaneously, the film cleverly dissimulates Iñárritu's minor strategy aimed at undercutting the capitalist media market exploitation. The minoritarian stance is reflected in his employment of neobaroque formal overabundance to make the viewers realize their immersion in the director's melancholy enjoyment of his eternal entrapment in the Mexican-American borderland. This effort, however, is immediately compounded by the director's contradictory affects inherent in his global celebrity status as an inhabitant of that particular *Bardo*.

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²⁶ César Augusto Salgado, "Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112 (1999): 325, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/541365>.

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OF AXOLOTLS, VULNERABLE BODIES AND TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY POLITICS:
NEOBAROQUE REPRESENTATION OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN BORDERLAND
IDENTITY IN THE FILM *BARDO, FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS*
BY ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU

Summary

This article examines Alejandro González Iñárritu's skillful employment of neobaroque representation strategies in his metacinematic emography *Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths*, to present the complexities of the borderland identity of Mexican-American emigrants, and its entanglement in the legacy of the myth of the Mexican character with its axolotl symbolism. The inquiry focuses in particular on the director's porte-parole Silverio Gama and his family. The film's mise-en-abyme, a para-documentary *False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths* made by Silverio, a filmmaker of transnational reputation like Iñárritu, is considered a meta-commentary on Iñárritu's own filmmaking and the political consequences of immersion in the mediatized reality. The para-documentary is also analysed as an example of Iñárritu's manipulation of the tension between the major and minor strategies of neobaroque representation in order to interrogate the transnational Mexican-American history politics as well as the dreams, aspirations, and vulnerability of Mexican emigrants traversing deserts on their way to the U.S. border. The article concludes with a claim that Silverio's identity can only be comprehended if the canon of the axolotl is considered to reflect the condition of *Bardo*, an intermediate state between life and death.

Keywords: canon of axolotl; emography; Alejandro González Iñárritu; imago; neobaroque; major vs. minor strategy

O AKSOLOTLACH, BEZBRONNYCH CIAŁACH I TRANSNARODOWEJ POLITYCE
HISTORYCZNEJ: NEOBAROKOWE PRZEDSTAWIENIA TOŻSAMOŚCI MEKSYKAŃSKO-
AMERYKAŃSKIEGO POGRANICZA W FILMIE *BARDO, FALSE CHRONICLE*
OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS W REŻYSERII ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZA IÑÁRRITU

Streszczenie

W artykule rozważane jest zastosowanie przez Alejandro González Iñárritu neobarokowych strategii przedstawienia w metacinematycznym filmie emograficznym *Bardo, fałszywa kronika garści prawd*, złożonego charakteru tożsamości meksykańskiej, ukształtowanej w obszarze

meksykańsko-amerykańskiego pogranicza, i jej uwikłania w dziedzictwo mitu meksykańskości, wraz z jego symboliką aksolotla. Dociekania zawarte w artykule koncentrują się na fikcyjnym para-dokumentcie *Falszywa kronika garści prawd* twórcy filmowego Silverio Gamy, pełniącego w filmie rolę porte-parole Iñárritu. Paradokument Silverio funkcjonuje jako autotematyczny model filmu *Bardo* i pełni rolę meta-komentarza na temat twórczości filmowej samego Iñárritu oraz politycznych konsekwencji zanurzenia się w zmediatyzowanej rzeczywistości. *Falszywa kronika garści prawd* omawiana jest również jako przykład manipulowania przez Iñárritu napięciem pomiędzy strategią wielką a strategią mniejszą neobarokowej reprezentacji w celu prześledzenia transnarodowej meksykańsko-amerykańskiej polityki historycznej, jak również marzeń, aspiracji, i podatności na krzywdę meksykańskich emigrantów podążających przez pustynię w kierunku granicy ze Stanami Zjednoczonymi. W zakończeniu artykułu podkreślony zostaje fakt, że tożsamość Silverio staje się bardziej zrozumiała, gdy kanon aksolotla rozważy się jako odzwierciedlenie kondycji Bardo, stanu pośredniego między życiem i śmiercią.

Słowa kluczowe: kanon axolotla; emografia; Alejandro González Iñárritu; imago; neobarok; strategia wielka vs strategia mniejsza